

3

YURI TAMA

From

Third Wheel to Trifecta

| STORY | toshizou
| ART | Kuro Shina



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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Chapter 1: What If Your Childhood Friend Was a Mega-Popular Idol?](#)

[Interlude I: Yuna Momose](#)

[Chapter 2: Asking Out and Going Out](#)

[Interlude II: Rinka Aiba](#)

[Chapter 3: An Aquarium “Date” to Remember](#)

[Chapter 4: Makina’s True Intentions](#)

[Epilogue: Peace Was Never in the Cards](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: What If Your Childhood Friend Was a Mega-Popular Idol?

I, Yotsuba Hazama, can say with confidence that my life has just peaked.

...Okay, I know how that sounds, but it's not an exaggeration! Probably. Pretty sure, anyway. At the present moment, I'm sixteen years old and a genuine second-year high schooler! There's this one, like, super old and famous play or something with a song that claims a human's life is meant to last fifty years, and even by that standard I'm only about a third of the way through my lifetime, but I'm still *very* aware of how preposterously, unrealistically happy I am right now and how unlikely it is that anything could ever top it.

I spent my whole life with solitude as my only companion until I got into high school, but then out of *complete* nowhere, I suddenly found two incredibly wonderful friends, right out of the gate! And then, a year after I met them...the three of us ended up in a relationship. In other words: I ended up two-timing them! It was such an outrageously moronic decision that even the most put-together and sensible person I know, Mai Koganezaki, was so flabbergasted when she found out that she shot straight past exasperation and scorn and flew into a fit of uncontrollable hysterics instead. That said, it's not exactly a choice that was made lightly. The three of us really thought things through, carefully and seriously, before choosing to go forward with our relationship in this way.

Yuna Momose and Rinka Aiba were both such dazzlingly incredible girls that it almost felt like them being friends with *me* of all people was a waste. I found myself wishing sometimes that I could be reborn as one of them, but then I'd always realize that if I became them, I'd only ever be able to *see* them when I happened to be around a mirror, and thought better of it...and as you can probably tell from *that* stupid little internal conflict of mine, I've always really admired both of them. Whether as my friends, or as my girlfriends, or even as total strangers, I loved them with all my heart.

Anyway, *they* loved *me* as well, as it so happened, and the two of them both

worked up the courage to ask me out! I, of course, hadn't even begun to consider the possibility they'd feel that way about me and was *totally* caught off guard, but being the idiot that I and everyone around me had always known that I was, I threw caution and common sense to the wind and said yes to both of them on impulse. Considering that everything ultimately worked out perfectly for us thanks to that decision, I found myself feeling thankful toward my own idiocy for the first time in my life. *Heh—score one for stupidity!*

"What're you smirking about?"

"Gah! Sakura?!"

My little sister had caught me basking in the glory of my (past) accomplishment! Of course, it *was* an early afternoon in the middle of summer vacation, and I *was* in my family's living room, sprawled out in my usual position on the couch like the slacker I am. I'd been staring at the TV in a daze, all but screaming, "Somebody, please notice me, pay attention to me," so maybe her catching me *wasn't* really a surprise at all, but still!

"Here. I made tea, if you want some," said Sakura.

"Oh, yay! Thanks so much!" I said as I accepted the cup.

"It's not *that* big of a deal," muttered Sakura as she glanced away awkwardly.

Yup—my little sister's as adorable as ever today!

"What?" Sakura snapped, her lips pursed in a pouty, ever so slightly bashful frown.

"I was just thinking you're as cute as ever today!" I said.

"Ugh! I mean...thanks," said Sakura. Her frown began to fade, and she took a seat next to me, so close our shoulders were practically touching. Actually, no, not practically—they *were* touching. Pressed right up against each other, really. "I can move if it's too hot for this," she said.

"Nah, it's fine!" I replied. The way she'd sat down next to me herself, then gotten all worried about it barely a second later, was classic Sakura. That was just another side of her that made her as cute as a button, and I felt as privileged as ever to be her big sister!

We were as friendly as could be now, but up until just a little while ago, Sakura had been going through a tiny bit of a rebellious phase. If she'd seen me lazing my day away back then, she would've just silently glared daggers at me, most likely. I mean, I have to admit, I *am* super unreliable and it *is* definitely my fault that she couldn't find it in herself to respect me as her sister, so I can't really blame her for how she'd behaved back then at all. And that's not even *starting* on how she'd found out I was a two-timer!

That revelation had made her more contemptuous of me than ever...or rather, you'd *think* it would've, but instead, she and my other little sister, Aoi, decided to reveal that they were straight-up in love with me! Things got a little crazy, and you certainly couldn't call the things we went through *normal* by the standards of an average sibling relationship, but in the long run, Sakura, Aoi, and I had all developed a much deeper understanding of each other, and the bonds between the Hazama sisters had grown stronger than ever.

So, yeah—I dunno if I can exactly say that things had all worked out perfectly that time around, but what I *can* say is that ever since then, Sakura had started hanging out around me and being physically affectionate with me as if it were perfectly natural, just like she had back when we were kids. *That* was a result that I could definitely be happy about!

"How've your studies been going, Sakura? Making progress?" I asked.

"Eh, it's been okay," said Sakura. "I figure that cramming for hours on end'll do more harm than good, though, so I'm taking a break right now."

"Gotcha, gotcha! Oh—am I messing up your break by chatting like this, or something?"

"Of course not. I came to *you*, didn't I? Plus...we don't get to be alone together like this all that often, right? I have to take advantage of that and really recharge my batteries," Sakura bashfully but insistently muttered, then hooked her arm around mine.

Well, okay, but "alone"? We're not exactly—

"Ohh, Sakura? I guess you just didn't notice me, huh?" a *third* voice piped up without warning.

“*Eeek?! Aoi?!*” Sakura shrieked, so surprised she leapt right up off the couch again.

Aoi gave Sakura a sort of sulky glower as she looked up at her from the couch—specifically from my lap, which she was using as a pillow.

“H-How long have you *been* there?!” Sakura gasped.

“The whole time,” said Aoi. “Yotsuba was spacing out and watching TV, so I said, ‘Can I nap on your lap, pleeease?’ and she said, ‘Sure,’ so I did.”

That is, in fact, exactly how it had happened. Speaking as her sister, it was entirely impossible for me to turn down a request that was *that* adorable. That said, I was a little surprised to see her awake—she’d looked like she was snoozing away so comfortably just moments ago, I’d assumed she was out like a light.

“You really *do* only have eyes for Yotsuba, don’t you, Sakura?” teased Aoi with a smirk.

“Ugh,” Sakura grunted. It seemed that *her* little sister’s teasing was her greatest weakness.

“Too bad for you, though! I already have Yotsuba’s lap booked!” said Aoi. “And ahh, she smells so *nice*! Sniff sniff!”

“H-H-Hey, Aoi?!” I shrieked, objecting before Sakura had the chance as Aoi buried her face in my thighs—pretty close to *between* them, really. I was suddenly glad that I’d worn pants on that day, considering that if I’d been in a skirt, she might’ve gotten an all but direct whiff of my undies. *Past me gets full marks for picking out her outfit this morning!*

“A-Aoi!” Sakura finally shouted. “You lucky little—I mean, cut that out! You’re bothering her!”

“Aww, am I bothering you, Yotsuba?” asked Aoi, turning over to look up at me with her big ole puppy-dog eyes.

Gah! S-So cuuute! Being the youngest sister, Aoi had always been better at getting herself pampered than the rest of us, and that trait had only escalated ever since the whole telling-me-she-loved-me incident. I, meanwhile, had

always doted upon her without reservation, but ever since then, I'd been even *less* capable of resisting her than ever. I could *easily* overlook a little bit of poor behavior like—

“Hey, Yotsuba... You'd take your pants off if I asked you to, right?”

“Hyeeek?!”

“Yotsuba...?” Aoi repeated, stepping it up from puppy-dog eyes to “sad, abandoned puppy dog in the rain” eyes. Just one look at that expression was *almost* enough to make me nod on reflex without even thinking, but before I had the chance...

“Yotsuba, please.”

“Ah!”

...Sakura's flat, to-the-point voice snapped me out of my stupor! *Wh-Whoa, that was close! If Sakura hadn't been here to save me, I might've actually gone and done it!*

“You too, Aoi!” Sakura continued. “Just because Yotsuba's a moron doesn't mean you have a right to trick her whenever you feel like it!”

“Ugh... Okaaay,” Aoi droned.

“Look at *you*, Miss Big Sister!” I commented.

“I have to play the big sister more often than you'd think,” Sakura muttered, with a look on her face that silently added, *Because you spend all your time spoiling Aoi.*

I had to admit, she wasn't totally wrong about that. Okay, she wasn't even a *little* wrong about that. *My good name as a big sister has been sullied!*

“Be honest, though—you're here because you wanted her to spoil *you* too, didn't you?” said Aoi.

“Well, of course I—” Sakura began, then gasped. “N-No, I'm not! Aoiiii!”

“Sorry if I ruined that plan! Of course, I'm not moving one way or another!”

“Well, maybe you *should*!”

“Huuuh? Why? If I *did* free up her lap, would *you* use it as a pillow next?”

“I—I mean,” Sakura stammered, then paused and gritted her teeth. It seemed Aoi had been right on the mark.

Of course, I would’ve let Sakura nap on my lap any time, if she’d only just asked! *Ah, but then again, she might be embarrassed to let me dote on her while Aoi’s watching.* Speaking as the oldest sibling, I was always in big-sister mode, so I couldn’t *quite* relate, but on the other hand, I would’ve been hesitant to act spoiled with our parents if my sisters were watching. I figured that probably came from a similar place.

All right, then—unless she doesn’t seem like she’s into it, I think I’ll have to be as doting with Sakura as I can possibly manage the next time we’re alone! I’d always thought that she was too put-together and in control to *want* me to treat her that way, so I’d never made a real effort to do so in the past, and it seemed it was time to fix that oversight.

“What’re you smirking for, Yotsuba?” asked Aoi.

“Huh? Was I?!”

“You sure were! Right, Sakura?”

“You really were, yeah.”

“You guys don’t let anything slip past you, do you?!” Even when they were busy verbally sparring with each other, my little sisters always spared enough attention to notice every last little expression I made.

“Ah, Sakura, your phone’s vibrating!” I said a second later. That’s right—they weren’t the only ones who could be surprisingly sharp-eyed! Sakura had set her phone down on the nearby table, and I’d caught it buzzing out of the corner of my eye. Unlike me, Sakura and Aoi had tons of friends, so I knew I had to call her attention to it right away. After all, it’d be a disaster if she accidentally ignored a message and had one of her friendships start breaking down as a result!

“Eh, I’m sure it’s nothing important,” Sakura muttered as she unenthusiastically glanced at her phone.

*Maybe it’s not, but if it turns out it is, you’ll be glad you checked...*is what I was thinking, but I knew that the more I bothered them about that sort of thing, the

more they'd start thinking of me as their nag of a big sister, so I kept it to myself. *Come on, let it be something important enough that she ends up being grateful I pointed it out!*

"Hmm... *Huuuuuuh?!?*"

A moment after Sakura looked at her phone, she let out a crazed shriek! *W-Wait, was it actually a super important message after all?!*

"Wh-What's wrong, Sakura?!" I asked.

"Ah! Umm, well," Sakura mumbled. I could tell that she was really shaken up from the way her gaze darted about the room as she paused for a moment, gulped, took a few deep breaths, then finally answered. "It looks like Maki Amagi's taking a hiatus from show business..."

Maki...Amagi?

"*Whaaaaaat?!?*" Aoi shouted before I could even process what I'd heard. I wasn't really following—in fact, I had no idea what she was talking about—but Aoi, it seemed, was on the same page as Sakura. "Maki Amagi? Like, *that* Maki?! From Shoo-Star?!"

"*Shoe Star?*" *Maki from Shoe Star...?* The names *felt* like they were ringing a bell, but it was a very quiet one, and when I tried to search through my mental database for them, they didn't turn up any immediate hits. *That's weird—my mental database isn't exactly packed to begin with, so you'd think it'd be easy to search through!*

"See, Aoi? Look! The news is all over the place online!" said Sakura.

"R-Really?! It's not just a prank?" asked Aoi.

"I *wish* it was, but they put out a press release and everything. It looks legit..."

"No waaay!" Aoi shouted as she bolted upright and clutched at her head.

Sakura didn't look like she was in much better shape—she seemed dumbstruck by the sheer shock of it all. I, meanwhile, was still totally out of the loop and just kinda sat there in a daze (not that *that's* anything new).

That said, I couldn't just marinate in my confusion forever! I was their big sister, dangit! If my little sisters were in distress, there had to be *something* I

could do to help, no matter how foreign the subject matter was to me! “So, umm, you said something about a break from show business? Are you talking about a celebrity?” I asked, making like Holmes himself and putting together a rational deduction based off the very limited set of information I had to work with! I gave myself pretty darn decent odds that I’d hit the bull’s-eye too, and was feeling awfully proud of myself...

“Ugggh...”

...until both of my sisters let out sighs of profound exasperation!

“Do you not know who Maki is, Yotsuba?” asked Aoi.

“Umm... Y-Yeah, of course I do!” I said. “But, umm, maybe you could give me juuust a little hint, for fun...?”

“That’s basically the same thing as admitting that you don’t know who she is at all,” pointed out Sakura.

Ugh... Now they were staring at me in that distinctly fed-up sort of way!

“Actually, didn’t I tell you all about her just the other day?” said Aoi.

“And besides, didn’t she star in that drama you were totally hooked on until it ended this past June?” added Sakura.

Agh! I got hit by an actually/besides combo! They were clearly drifting from “fed up” into “is she for real?” territory in a hurry, but finally, my mental database pinged me with a result for Maki Amagi. “Oh, wait... Do you mean Maki Amagi the idol?” I asked.

I don’t know what did the trick—my sisters hadn’t really given me that much new information or anything—but this time, the pieces clicked together and a very clear visual of an astonishingly pretty girl named Maki Amagi flashed through my mind. If I was remembering correctly, she’d made her debut as an idol when she was in middle school, and belonged to a group called Shooting Star. She’d been the group’s center—its most eye-catching, standout member—since pretty much the moment it was formed, and made regular appearances on music sales rankings, both in her group and as a solo performer. She’d been getting tons of roles in movies and TV dramas as an actress as well, and her fame had spread nationwide.

Now that I think about it, I have been seeing a lot of her lately...actually, no, not lately. It feels like she's been on TV pretty much all the time for ages. It felt like it had been years since a day had passed by *without* me seeing her, even. As to how I'd managed to not bring her immediately to mind after all that exposure, well...to put it simply, I'd blocked her out because I was jealous.

I mean, come *on*, wouldn't you be?! Maki Amagi was the same age as me, a second-year in high school, but *she* was out there shining like the sun itself, beloved by all of Japan—no, by the whole wide world! Back when I'd first learned about her, I had such a major envy episode, it left me cursing god for being just so darned *unfair* sometimes! Looking back on it, of course, the fact that I'd dared to compare myself to *her* of all people was downright arrogant. I'd been like a solitary ant trying to pick a fight with an elephant. Still, though, that distaste took root in my mind, and whether consciously or not, I'd started pointedly not paying attention whenever she turned up on TV.

To think I used to love idols so much when I was little... I do mean little too, around kindergarten age. Come to think about it, wasn't there another girl who also loved—

Ding-dong!

"Ah! Maybe it's a delivery?" I said as the sound of our doorbell stole my attention away. My sisters were still totally distracted by their idol's hiatus, and had changed the TV to a gossip show that was covering the topic, so I didn't think they'd be moving anytime soon. "I'll go get it," I said (even though I figured they wouldn't even hear me) and headed for the door. I made it to our entryway, laid a hand on the doorknob, and only then realized that I could've used our intercom to talk with whoever was outside first. It seemed a little late for that, though, so I shrugged it off and opened the door.

"Augh!" I grunted as I took a blast of hot air to the face. It was in the midthirties Celsius—a record-breaking heat wave, apparently—and there wasn't a cloud in the sky to blunt the brutal force of the sun's rays as they poured down upon me. I almost shut my eyes *and* the door on reflex, but I managed to tough it out and turn my gaze outside...and forgot about the heat *and* the piercing brightness in the blink of an eye.

“...Huh?”

There was a girl standing on our doorstep. She was just a little bit taller than me, and looked like she was around my age, but oh *boy*, is that where the similarities between us stopped! She was slender and beautiful, with a figure that suggested an adultlike maturity, and her long, lovely hair shimmered in the scorching light of the sun above. Her gaze was overflowing with confidence, her nose was perfectly shapely, and an ever so slight smile graced her lips. She just *shined*, so brightly that I almost wondered for a moment if she was the sun itself given form.

People can't actually, literally shine, of course—that was just how I perceived her—but the point is, she had such an incredibly powerful aura that I couldn't *help* but see her that way! It was also the sort of aura that could make a water flea given human form like me regret being born as it purged me from existence, but she spoke up before we could get to that point.

“Yotsy?”

“Bwuh?”

“I knew it! It *is* you, Yotsy!”

The girl's already-blinding aura of brilliance shined still brighter as she grabbed me by the shoulders. I legitimately thought my heart was going to stop for a second from that alone, honestly. She'd captivated my attention so thoroughly I forgot to breathe. She was ten times—no, a *hundred* times more brilliant in person than she'd seemed on the screen of a phone or TV.

“Yotsy? Do you not remember me after all...?” she said as a hint of worry crossed her expression.

I'm sure the look I was giving her *screamed*, “Nope, sure don't,” but at the same time, I felt a tiny hint of nostalgia begin to blossom. It was that name she was calling me—*Yotsy*. Nobody in my family ever called me that, but it had a certain familiar ring to it.

“Yotsy! *Wait for me, Yotsy!*”

“Hee hee, *nooope! You don't wait up when you're playing tag!*”

A pair of childish voices rang out in my mind. One of them was most likely mine, and the other belonged to...

“...Makimaki?”

The girl before me gasped as the name slipped past my lips. Her eyes widened, the hints of tears began to pool in their corners...and then she beamed at me. There was something there as well—a hint of something familiar in that expression of hers.

“W-Wait, seriously? You’re really *that* Makimaki?” I stammered in disbelief. It wasn’t easy to accept, but putting it into words was enough to make it feel at least a little bit real. Makimaki was a name from my youth—from an era of my life that I’d all but entirely forgotten. It was a nickname, really—my *friend’s* nickname.

“So then, you...you *do* remember me after all!” she shouted, sounding like she’d been deeply moved by the revelation, then threw her arms around me and pulled me into a tight hug. It was a totally natural gesture between friends, but in *her* case, I couldn’t help but feel something a lot more special behind it. “I finally came back to meet with you! I’ve wanted to see you for so, *so long!*” she said as she squeezed me with all her might.

I, however, could barely even process what she was saying. I was totally frozen in place, actually, unable to believe what was happening, but the feeling of her warmth, the tickle of her breath on the nape of my neck, the sound of her lovely voice...all of it was undeniably real. There was no doubt that she really was right here with me.

Makimaki: the girl I’d made friends with back in kindergarten. I had completely forgotten that I’d even *had* a friend, and I was more or less a totally different person now than I’d been back then. She, however, had gone through an even more dramatic change.

You mean that the Maki Amagi...the girl who my sisters—no, who the whole universe is obsessed with...was Makimaki this whole time?!

At this point, she hardly needs any further introduction. Maki Amagi was the

era's most famous Japanese person, and a girl whose name was, at that very moment, the number one trending subject on social media. She was the woman of the hour. Everyone was searching for her, and everyone wanted to hear what she had to say about recent developments, and yet here she was. That oh so special girl, beloved by everyone far and wide, was hugging me with all her might.

Wh-Wh-Wh...Wh-Wh...What the heck is going ooon?!

The situation was far, *far* too much for me to cope with, so instead of doing that thing, I just froze up and shut down.

I'd made it through my own two-timing. I'd gotten past my troubles with my sisters. I'd *finally* claimed a little slice of peace and quiet for myself, and thought that I could breathe a sigh of relief and just let things be for a little, but suddenly a new speed bump had materialized in front of me. This probably goes without saying, but oh *boy*, was it ever obvious that this new development would mark the beginning of a whole *heap* of trouble for me!



The mega-popular, universally beloved idol Maki Amagi's real name was Makina Oda. Who could've known that her secret identity—I mean, if you can really call it that—was my very own childhood friend!

In order to shed some light on my relationship with her, I'll have to turn back the clock and talk about my time in kindergarten a little first. Discounting, like, right now, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that my time in kindergarten was, without a doubt, the point at which my life had peaked. We didn't have tests or athletic competitions back then. Our school events were more about having fun—going out to play tag with all our classmates, and stuff like that. Our day-to-day lives were filled with those simple little activities, and I managed to get by without exposing myself as the klutzy dolt I was. That put me on equal terms with all the other students at my kindergarten.

We'd all play together, day in and day out...and that was where I met Makina, or rather, Makimaki. The two of us hit it off pretty much immediately. I'd established myself as the goofy group moron whose only redeeming quality was

her cheerfulness, while Makimaki was a pretty quiet kid. We probably looked like a poor match, but in spite of that, I ended up considering her my best friend, and she thought the same about me.

The biggest driving force behind our mutual friendship: idols. The two of us just *loved* to watch them perform on TV. The way they sang, the way they danced, the way they looked—all of it seemed so dazzling to us, and just watching them made us feel like we could somehow become special too. Sometimes we'd meet up at my place and sometimes we'd meet up at hers, but regardless of where we were, we'd end up watching music programs that our parents had recorded, our eyes sparkling with glee as we shrieked and squealed in excitement. It was *always* the highlight of the day for us.

"Wow... I wish I could be like that too," Makimaki would always end up muttering enviously as we watched. She was a quiet, reserved little girl, and I think that's probably part of why she wanted to be more like her beloved idols. *"But that's weird, right? I could never be one of them..."*

"It's not weird at all!" I'd say, ready at the drop of a hat to cheer her on like the moron I was. *"If you ever become an idol, I'll be your biggest fan! I'll go to all your concerts and wave glow sticks and everything!"* I'd add, squeezing her hand and staring her right in the eye, even when she did her best to anxiously break eye contact, all to prove to her just how genuine I was being. We must've gone through that same exact exchange dozens of times, so I think she probably knew that was how I'd react after the first couple incidents.

"Yotsy...!" Makimaki would say with a big, childish grin. I loved her smile. It always made me smile right along with her.

I was sure that she'd be an idol someday, and that I'd cheer her on as her biggest fan! We were both deathly serious about that promise, but of course, neither of us had any idea of what specifically it'd take to fulfill it. Instead of working toward it, we spent our days playing and laughing without a care in the world. Or at least, we did until the school year came to a close and Makimaki's parents had to move away, taking her with them.

Not long after Makimaki left, I started elementary school and my life entered an extended ice age. Needless to say, the frigid state of things was on account

of all those tests and competitions I *hadn't* had to deal with in kindergarten. No matter what I tried to do, I was totally worthless at it, and my classmates quickly got fed up with me. The laughter and jeers weren't far behind, and I soon found myself *thankful* that Makimaki didn't have to see me turn into such a failure. As time went by, I thought about her less and less, eventually even forgetting that we'd been friends in the first place...

"You really did become an idol in the end, huh, Makimaki?" I said.

"That's right!" she replied. "So, you know about me?"

"O-Of course I do! You're famous!" I said, quickly resolving to keep secret the fact that I'd totally failed to remember her idol persona even after having her name thrown in my face just a matter of minutes ago. *Actually, I forgot about her in general, period, a hundred percent...and oh, wow, do I feel guilty about it now!*

"I, uh...guess it might be kinda rude to call you Makimaki these days, huh?" I muttered. I hadn't really meant to say it out loud—it just slipped out—but it really did feel that way to me. It just seemed wrong for someone like *me* to be so casual with—

"Cut that out, Yotsy!"

"Huh?"

"I may be Maki Amagi these days, but that doesn't mean I'm not your Makimaki too!"

"My Makimaki...?" I repeated in a daze.

"I'm really happy right now, you know? I finally got to meet my favorite person again, after all this time! I'm so glad I finally got to come see you," Makimaki said as she took my hands between hers, clasping them together as if in prayer. The gesture looked so darn picturesque I couldn't help but gulp.

"N-Nah, I just meant that 'Makimaki' sounds like a kid's nickname, that's all!" I blurted out randomly. I'd gotten a weird sense that I had to make up *some* sort of excuse to break the flow of the exchange, or else it'd swallow me up before I knew it.



She was definitely Makimaki, my friend from kindergarten. That being said, I could tell that she wasn't *quite* the same person she'd been back then. I mean, she'd gone all the way from kindergarten to high school in the meantime, so of course she wasn't! And that wasn't even starting on the unimaginable wealth of experience she must've amassed as she became an idol and climbed to the peak of the entertainment world. At the very least, she didn't display any of her old shy, reserved nature—nowadays, she projected an aura of assertive maturity from the core of her being!

"I guess I could call you, like, Makina? Or just Maki...? Maybe Makimaks?"

"Isn't that last one even more childish than Makimaki?"

"Oh, right! Good point!"

"Then again, I've actually had adults call me that in the past," Makimaki droned with a faraway look in her eyes. I got the feeling that it *wasn't* a nickname she'd been happy to receive. "You get that sometimes. People give you a nickname out of nowhere to try and make it feel like they're closer to you than they actually are."

"H-Huh, I see," I said.

"Ah! W-Wait, no, I wasn't trying to say you *can't* give me a nickname!" Makimaki quickly clarified. "I'm sorry! I was just so happy to see you, I ended up saying anything that popped into my head," she continued, her shoulders slumping with disappointment.

Gah, what am I doing?! Umm... "Don't worry about it! It's totally okay, Maki!" I said.

"Maki...?" Makimaki repeated.

"Ah, sorry!" I shouted, backpedaling immediately.

"No, it's fine! I'd be happy with any name you want to call me," said Makimaki. "But, well..."

"Well?"

"If I could have you call me whatever I wanted, I think I'd be happiest if you went with Makina."

“Just Makina? No nickname?”

“Lots of other people call me Maki these days, so, you know,” she mumbled.

Oh, I get it. Considering it was the name she went by when working as an idol, all sorts of people she didn’t actually know probably called her “Maki” on a regular basis. They probably made up all sorts of variants too—heck, some of them might’ve even called her Makimaki! Maki Amagi’s *real* name, however, had never been announced to the general public. There were almost certainly way fewer people who called her by her actual name than her stage name, which meant that to her, it would feel all the more special. “Okay...Makina it is, then!” I said.

“Great!” said Makimaki—or rather, Maki—or rather, Makina, with a completely unreserved smile.

“Oh, right—why’re we standing out here to talk?” I continued. “You can come inside, if you want! My little sisters might be surprised to see you, though.”

“Your little sisters... Ah, Sakura and Aoi, right?”

“That’s them! They were probably still tiny back when you knew them, but now they’re a couple of grown-up middle schoolers!”

“Right, I guess they would be, wouldn’t they...?” said Makina. “But you’re right, they probably *would* be shocked if I just walked into their home without warning.”

“Yeah... Yeah, that’s probably true,” I admitted. Considering how much of a ruckus they’d kicked up when they learned that Makina was taking a hiatus from her career, having the real deal stroll into their living room might make them faint on the spot.

“And I’ll have plenty of chances to see them soon, anyway! See? Look over there!” Makina said as she stepped out onto the sidewalk and gestured off to the side. There, in front of the house that she and her family had lived in so long ago, was a huge moving truck. “I’m moving in again!”

“You are? Oh, wow!” I said.

“Yup! The house just happened to go on the market at the right moment,”

said Makina.

On the market? Does that mean she bought the place? No, no, it must've been her parents. I bet they repurchased their old home... But then again, she is one of the most popular idols out there. It wouldn't be weird for her to have enough money to buy a house, would it? Wow...that's incredible. It's so incredible, I can't even describe how incredible it is!

"Wait," I said as I processed the implications. "You're moving in? So you're going to be living in these parts again?"

"Yup! Starting today!"

"Oh, huh. So you're in the middle of moving right now..."

"Hee hee hee," Makina giggled. "Hopefully we'll have plenty of chances to see each other from now on! Right, Miss New Neighbor?"

"R-Right!" I agreed. The thought of having an idol living right in my neighborhood was a little nerve-racking, but thinking of it as my old friend Makina being around again made it feel exciting instead.

"I *am* really busy with all the moving stuff today, though," Makina continued. "I actually have to get back to it pretty soon."

"Ah, right! Sorry for holding you up," I said.

"That's not a problem at all! I mean, I wanted to spend every last second I possibly could with you," said Makina. "I'd pick you right up and take you home with me if I could!"

"Huh?"

For a second, we just stared at each other.

"Gotcha! Just kidding!" said Makina, sticking out her tongue in that playful, silly sort of way people do when they just pranked you good.

O-Oh, okay, just a joke! I'd actually taken her so seriously for a second, my heart had skipped a beat. A nationally renowned idol's acting ability was not to be underestimated! She had some *major* skills, and somebody like me (with a lower-than-average ability to judge these things) could've easily been conned so thoroughly, I'd have found myself wiring her my life savings before I knew it!

“So, yeah—I have to go now, but do you have some time tomorrow?” Makina asked.

“Tomorrow?” I repeated.

“Like, are you free in the afternoon? Around, oh...maybe two past or so?”

“Two past...? Oh, like two o’clock? Yeah, I should be free!”

“Oh, good! In that case, would you mind coming over to my house then? We’re neighbors now, so I thought it’d be nice to take the chance to show you my place.”

“Yeah, okay!” I agreed immediately. Exchanging a casual promise like that really made it feel like we’d gone back to the old days. *We used to go over to each other’s houses all the time back then...*

“Hee hee hee! There’s that face,” said Makina.

“Huh? What face? It wasn’t weird, was it?!”

“No, no! It’s just, well...it told me that you were probably thinking the same thing I was, I guess.”

“Oh...I was? You think so?”

“Yeah, I do. My memories of the time we spent together back then are my greatest treasure.”

“Oh, come on, you’re exaggerating!” I chuckled. Makina was an idol now. I had no doubt that she lived in a *way* more fulfilling and dazzling world than I did—a world that almost everyone wished they could inhabit. If anything, the fact that she remembered *me* at all was more or less a miracle...though I guess that might sound sarcastic coming from me, considering *I’m* the one who’d forgotten *her*.

“Okay, see you tomorrow, Yotsy! Don’t forget to show up! You’re not allowed to be late either!” said Makina.

“Yeah! See you tomorrow!” I replied, then watched as she hurried back over to her house.

Oh, wow, all the movers are women! And look at that—they’re all totally

overwhelmed the second they see her! I get that, honestly... I mean, she's the Maki Amagi and all.

"So Maki Amagi was Makimaki...ah, I mean Makina," I muttered to myself. You really never knew what sort of crazy twist the world was going to throw at you next.

Yuna and Rinka, a pair of beauties admired by everyone they met, could fall for a girl like me. Sakura and Aoi, my little sisters who couldn't possibly have been more perfect, could develop feelings beyond plain sisterhood for someone like me too. Even after all those unbelievably astonishing experiences, though, the big reveal *this* time was so shocking I couldn't help but be thrown for a loop by it.

Makina had chased her dreams and made them come true. I, however, had remained totally ignorant that she and Maki Amagi were the same person, deeming her an inhabitant of a totally different world and putting up a wall between us.

"I really am hopeless," I sighed. I was confident that Makina hadn't been seeing me for who I *really* was when we'd reunited. The *real* me was a girl who everyone else had lost hope in and drifted away from. I'd turned into a loner, and the role suited me to a T. I'd told Makina that I'd cheer her on—that I'd be her biggest fan—but instead, I'd forgotten about her entirely and spent all my time failing to even keep up with my *own* problems...

"No," I said with a shake of my head, "I can't just assume the worst like this!"

I'd met with Makina again, one way or another, and I wasn't the only one who'd changed. I was sure that in the time we'd been out of contact with each other, she too had turned into a new Makina who I didn't know. We'd parted in kindergarten and met again in high school, for crying out loud, and *she'd* gone and become an *idol* in the meantime! The thing is, though, none of that changed the fact that seeing her again had made me really, really happy. I wanted to talk with her more, and to be friends with her again.

"Wow... So you really made your dream come true, Makina," I muttered. That was something to be happy about, and I wanted to give *those* feelings the spotlight, not wallow in negativity. We'd promised to meet up again tomorrow,

after all! “Wait...how long have I spent talking out here?! Sakura and Aoi might be getting worried!”

I rushed back into the living room without wasting a second! I was *not* the sort of person who stood around in the entryway having lengthy chats, so it was totally possible that the two of them were sitting around, anxiously wondering if everything was okay, or if they should call out to me and make sure— “Ahh, Sakura! It says they’re broadcasting a press conference on channel five!”

“Umm, channel five, channel five...ah, it’s true!”

Never mind. They weren’t even the teensiest, tiniest bit worried about me after all. In reality, they were still totally preoccupied by their shock about Maki’s hiatus from the idol world and were completely absorbed in what I assumed was a prerecorded press conference she’d given on the subject.

“She’s taking a break to focus on school...? But for how long?”

“She’s supposed to be a second-year high schooler, right? If they mean she wants to focus on her entrance exams, that’d mean she’ll be back the year after next... But if she wants to focus on college too, it could be even longer...”

“Longer than two years?! No way!”

My adorable little sisters were way more concerned about how long a super-popular idol would be taking a break than they were about their sister having a way longer conversation than was typical for her. Which, I mean, was fair enough, I guess. *I* was a constant presence in their home lives. If I entered into their thought processes at all right now, it would probably involve them telling me that I’d do well to focus a little harder on my schoolwork too.

If only they knew that the very same Maki stopped by for a visit just moments ago, I thought to myself, but I didn’t say it out loud. I might’ve been able to claim their attention if I did, sure, but that would’ve been Maki’s—or rather, Makina’s influence at work, not my own. Plus, I would’ve been really sad if they ended up liking her more than me!

With that incredibly petty thought in mind, I took a backward glance at my sisters and their antics as I wandered into the kitchen and started thinking about what I’d make for dinner that night.



And, before I knew it, the next day arrived!

“Okay, guys, I’m heading out for a little...”

“*Huh?*” my little sisters grunted, looking at me with completely undisguised suspicion. We’d just finished lunch, and I’d gotten a little dressed up for my outing, which must’ve caught their attention.

“I didn’t think you had any dates scheduled today,” said Aoi.

“She doesn’t, according to Yuna and Rinka,” added Sakura.

“Wait a second—you actually *asked* them?!” I yelped.

“Duh,” said Sakura. “They said to keep them posted if you ever looked like you were doing anything sketchy.”

“Sure did!” agreed Aoi.



Since when did the four of them start coordinating like this?!

“Your next date’s the day after tomorrow, right?” said Sakura.

“And it’s with both of them! All three of you, going out together,” added Aoi.

And just how much info’s getting leaked to them?! I wasn’t *upset* about it, of course—I was perfectly fine with Yuna and Rinka sharing our plans with my sisters—but it just struck me that if I *did* ever want to sneak around for whatever reason, it would be next to impossible to manage it.

“So, Yotsuba,” said Aoi, “where are you going all dressed up when you don’t even have a date today?” asked Sakura.

“Eep!” I squeaked.

“You *never* pretty yourself up unless you’re going out to meet with one of those two,” added Aoi.

“Uh, Sakura...? Aoi...?” I awkwardly muttered as the two of them gave me a hard, appraising stare. I was feeling a distinct sense of danger—or rather, of *déjà vu*. It was like I’d been through all this before, only this time, their scrutiny was even *more* intense.

“I’d rather not even consider this, but...are you cheating?” asked Sakura.

“N-No way!” I shouted.

“Oohh, really?” Aoi chimed in.

“Of course not! I’d never! I’m as faithful and devoted as a girl could get!”

“...”

“Right, sorry. Aside from the two-timing, I mean.” I’d rushed into an excuse and dug myself straight into a hole in the process. To be clear, I really *was* doing my best to be faithful in my own sort of way, but the second you start talking about being faithful and devoted to two people at once, most people pretty much stop listening. *Anyway, though*— “I’m just going to meet with a friend, that’s all!”

“Isn’t that what she said last time?” asked Aoi.

“Sure is,” said Sakura.

“Ugh... Okay, but this time she’s *actually* just a friend! A *friend*-friend, not a girlfriend!” I insisted. They could grill me all they liked, but I was actually telling the complete and total truth this time, so I could be as confident and definitive with my denial as I wanted to!

“Agh!” Sakura winced.

“She’s in serious mode!” said Aoi, cringing away as well.

Now, to be fair, I couldn’t blame them for reading into the fact that I’d prettied myself up a little. I wouldn’t do that to meet with just any friend, but today, I was meeting with *Makina*. She’d been living in a celebrity’s world for years, so she was probably used to *those* standards, and if at all possible, I didn’t want her to think I looked like a tacky loser!

“Today’s not a great day for it, but I’ll introduce you two to her sometime soon!” I said.

“Well, if you’re *that* sure about it,” said Aoi.

“Mnhh... Okay, *fine*!” added Sakura.

The two of them had finally come around. The fact that they were so concerned about me just going out for a little was kinda concerning to *me* in turn, but I knew that they were just worried about me, and I’d done *plenty* to justify those worries in the past. *Just wait, Sakura and Aoi—and Yuna and Rinka too, for that matter! I’ll do my best to make sure all of you can trust me more! It’d be nice if reuniting with Makina like this could be my first step toward that goal... Actually, no! I’ll make it the first step, one way or another!*

“Okay, I’m heading out! I’ll be back in time to make dinner!” I said, stepping outside with an unstated but firm resolve in my mind.



The walk from my place to Makina’s took all of ten seconds. I rang her doorbell, and she was opening the front door to greet me before its chime even finished playing.

“Hey, Yotsy! Come on in!”

“S-Sure!”

As I stepped inside and took another look at her, I was struck by the fact that, wow...Makina really *was* the real Maki Amagi. Something about her just *screamed* “pop idol.” She was dressed in a simple, relaxed set of loungewear, but it didn’t make her look sloppy in the slightest. She looked just plain cute in it, really. It was a genuine off-camera moment, so perfect that if I were one of her fans, I probably would’ve bowed down in tears to worship her.

“S-Sorry,” said Makina. “I spent ages worrying about what I should wear when you came over, but in the end, I decided that just being my normal self might help you feel a little more relaxed.”

“O-Oh, thanks,” I said, now aware that Makina *not* going all-out and just being her natural self still put her on a level so far above mine, I couldn’t even see that high. Compared to the look she was sporting, *my* outfit was like something a little kid would—

“You look so cute today, Yotsy!” said Makina.

“Huh?”

“The way you wear that outfit and the way it’s coordinated just *screams* you!”

I couldn’t quite tell if looking like myself was supposed to be a good thing or not...which just goes to show how well I knew myself, really. That said, Makina still only knew me from my kindergarten golden age, so I felt pretty confident saying that yup, it really was intended as a compliment! Or at least, I was prepared to *assume* it was a—

Fwump!

“Hyeeep?!” *Wait, why’s she hugging me all of a sudden?!*

“Oh, Yotsy,” Makina mumbled. “It’s really you! And you’re so much warmer than I ever imagined...”

“M-Makina? What’s going on?!” I yelped. She was really squeezing me, hard enough it was kinda tough to breathe, and her cheek was practically pressed up against mine. All I could do was stand there and panic. On the one hand, she was an idol, but setting that aside for a second, she was *also* my childhood friend. We were friends, yes, and friends do these things sometimes, but what had me so freaked out was the fact that this didn’t exactly feel like a *friendly*

sort of hug.

“Ah...I’m sorry!” said Makina, letting me go and backing off in a fluster. “I just got so emotional for a second, I couldn’t stop myself.”

“N-Nah, it’s okay! No problem at all!” I said, trying to play down what had just happened even as a *completely* implausible hunch began to form in the back of my mind.

“Anyway, come on in!” said Makina.

“Sure!” I replied.

Makina took me by the hand and pulled me down the hallway into her house. As we walked, I reflected on the fact that some of her fans had surely bought mountains of CDs and waited in endlessly long lines just to shake the same hand I was now casually holding. The thought made me feel a little guilty, I have to admit.

“So, I haven’t actually finished getting my room all set up yet,” said Makina. “Are you okay with hanging out in the living room?”

“S-Sure, that’s fine!” I replied. If her house still had the same layout as before she’d moved, I knew that her room would be on the second floor. I was a *little* curious about what it looked like, but the thought of stepping into an idol’s room was *way* too intimidating for me to even consider asking to see it.

“Here, I’ll get some tea,” said Makina as we stepped into the living room. “Let’s see... We have barley tea and black tea. Which sounds better?”

“Huh?! I-I can make it—you don’t have to bother!” I shouted.

“Why would *you* make the tea? I’m hosting *you*, aren’t I?” said Makina, chuckling at my panicked antics.

That just made the situation all the more embarrassing, and I felt my cheeks begin to heat up.

“I’ll have barley tea, I guess,” I said.

“Coming right up! You can relax on the couch in the meantime.”

I did just that and, for lack of anything better to do, spent the wait glancing

around her living room. My immediate impression was that the place was, in a word, modest. There was a table, some chairs, a couch, and a TV—everything you'd need in your typical, everyday living room—but none of it felt, I dunno, *fancy*. Maybe this was just me, but I'd always imagined celebrities' houses as being full of weird, exotic plants, antique vases, and expensive paintings and stuff.

"Thanks for waiting!" said Makina as she returned from the kitchen with two glasses of tea. She must've brewed them in advance, considering how little time it had taken her to get them. She set the glasses down on the low table in front of the couch, then sat down directly next to me, so close our sides were touching.

"H-Hey, Makina? Aren't you a little close?!" I yelped.

"Oh, am I? I thought we always sat like this back in the day," said Makina. In contrast to my consternation, *she* just seemed confused about why I was making such a big deal about it. She also didn't budge.

If I had to describe how close we were sitting, well...it was the sort of distance that'd make you think we were a couple. I'm talking how Yuna and Rinka sat with me when we were feeling a little touchy-feely. *Am I just being oversensitive, though? Maybe Makina's right and this is totally normal?*

"C-Come to think of it, how are your parents?" I asked. "I didn't see them yesterday. I guess they're busy with work?"

"Ah... They won't be moving here," said Makina.

"Huh?"

"I'll be living here on my own," she flatly explained. There was a coldness to her tone that made it feel like she was drawing a line, and even an idiot like me could tell that probing further would be a bad idea.

"O-Oh, okay," I awkwardly replied for lack of anything better to say.

A few moments of uncomfortable silence passed by.

"M-Must be pretty tough, huh? That means you're living alone, right?" I eventually said.

“I am,” said Makina, “but I don’t mind it at all. I’ve been constantly surrounded by people for so long that I was actually wanting more opportunities to be alone.”

“Come to think of it, you’re taking a hiatus from show business, right? I heard you wanted to focus on school for now?”

“That’s right. There’s no way I could work as an idol and focus on my entrance exams at the same time. Plus...” Makina said, then paused to take my hand and give it a squeeze.

I just could *not* stop reading into her each and every little action, like it or not, and that paranoia had me on edge. *Maybe this is the power of a pro idol at work?*

“I wanted to see you again, Yotsy,” she finally concluded.

“Bwuuuh...?” *Okay, so that one was pretty straightforward! Nothing hidden about that meaning!*

“Thinking about seeing you again is what’s been getting me through work lately,” she continued.

“O-Okay, you’ve gotta be exaggerating!”

“Specifically, for the past year and a half or so.”

“That’s *really* specific, and *way* longer than I expected!”

“Well, I couldn’t just stop the moment I decided that I wanted to. I had all sorts of things already set in stone in my schedule and contracts to fulfill before I could take the break that I wanted.”

Oh, wow... She’s such a professional! She couldn’t have been more different from a girl like me, who flew through her life by the seat of her pants. “Huh? Wait, does that mean that you’d already decided you’d be taking a hiatus a year and a half ago?” I asked.

“That’s right,” said Makina.

She was the same age as me, which meant that a year and a half ago would’ve been right around the time she started high school. That said—and I admit I didn’t have a super informed perspective here—it felt to me like she’d probably

only just begun her time in the limelight. She'd probably had to deal with all sorts of regulations and stuff when she worked in middle school, after all, and so many TV shows and stuff were set in high school that a real high schooler like her would've been *swimming* in roles. Plus, although she *was* already renowned throughout the whole country, her popularity was still very much on the rise. It just felt like this was the moment for her to keep pushing forward and growing as a performer, not go on hiatus. Slamming the brakes on her own career like that felt like a huge waste to me.

"You only get one chance to be a high schooler, after all," Makina said with a slightly bitter smile.

It was almost like she'd read my mind. That finally helped me understand, especially when I read in an unstated "real" before the words "high schooler."

"Plus, I wanted the two of us to..." Makina began, then trailed off.

"Huh? Me and you?" I said.

For a moment, she seemed to hesitate. It was an oddly unguarded moment for her. She looked almost frail, and it made me want to protect her in a way I couldn't quite take my mind off.

"Makina?" I said.

"Hey, Yotsy...? Do you remember the promise we made?" Makina asked.

"The promise...? Ah, you mean the one about you becoming an idol?" I replied. A twinge of pain shot through my chest as the words left my mouth. After all, the *other* half of the promise had been that I'd cheer her efforts on, and not only had I never realized that Makina really *had* become an idol, I'd actively turned away from her Maki Amagi persona time and time again. *Maybe she realized that I haven't kept my end of the promise...? But that couldn't possibly be enough to make her put her idol career on pause, could it?*

"Yotsy?"

"Huh?"

"What's the big deal? Why do you look so gloomy all of a sudden?" asked Makina.

“Wha—I did?!” I yelped.

“You certainly did,” she said with a nod. “Really, you’re just as unpredictable as you used to be.”

“S-Sorry,” I said. One minute I’d been listening to her, and the next I was brooding enough to make her worry about me. *This is all my stupid face’s fault! Why’s it have to let every little thing I think show in an instant?* “Mngggh...”

“Y-Yotsy?!” Makina yelped as I gave my cheeks a pinch, then pulled them as hard as I could to chastise myself.

“...Thish hurtsh.”

“N-No, *really*?! Of course it does! You’re stretching your cheeks like a couple of rice cakes!” said Makina. She seemed less horrified and more concerned by my sudden inexplicable behavior, and I found myself thinking once again about how nice she was. “You’ll make your cheeks swell up like that! Here, let me see. You’re so cute, it’d be awful if you left a mark,” she muttered as she touched my cheek, peered into my face...and froze up.

“Uh... Makina?” I said, but Makina didn’t move a muscle. She didn’t even *blink*. She just stared at me, her face so close to mine it felt like I might’ve been able to feel her breath. In the face of all that attention, I found myself feeling weirdly nervous.

Man—looking at her like this, she really is super cute! I thought. It was as basic as an impression could get, but she was just so ridiculously cute, honest! She was cute enough to make even a girl like me fall for her—cute enough that getting jealous of her just felt stupid. From this close up, I could tell that she wasn’t wearing makeup, but even without it, her eyelashes were long and beautiful and I could barely make out a single pore. *Is this what idols are like? Are we really the same species?!*

We sat there in silence. I could get why I was captivated by Makina, of course—that was a given—but what I couldn’t understand was why *she* was frozen as well. Her gaze was wavering, and the hand on my face shook as—

“...Huh?”

She laid her other hand on my shoulder, as if to hold me in place. Then,

before I could express my confusion, she shoved me over, laying me out on the couch.

“Makina...?”

“Yotsy,” said Makina. There was a heat to her words—a warmth that she seemed to be trying and failing to conceal.

My heart was beating like a drum. I knew it wasn’t possible—I knew this *couldn’t* be what I thought it was—but her gaze stayed locked to mine, and I couldn’t stop myself from jumping to conclusions.

“Hey, Yotsy,” said Makina. Her nose was so close to mine, their tips almost grazed each other. She’d toppled over with me, and was looking me right in the eye. “Do you still remember our other promise...? No, the other thing I asked you for?”

“Huh...?”

Another promise? Something she asked me for? Those words were way beyond my expectations. What else could I have promised her? Judging by how she was acting, it couldn’t have been a casual, day-to-day sort of promise. No, she made it seem like it was important enough to match the idol promise, if not exceed it. *But...did I really make a promise like that with her...?*

I only had tiny bits and pieces that I remembered from my time in kindergarten. Details had been coming back to me little by little since I’d reunited with Makina...but it wasn’t like I’d suddenly remembered *everything*, of course. *What was it I promised her? What did I say I’d do? Umm... Er...*

“You really don’t remember, do you?” Makina said, sounding a little disappointed, then pulled away from me and sat up.

“Ah...” I muttered. That stinging sensation in my chest was back again. I’d reunited with her after so long, and there I was, betraying her expectations over and over. I wanted to say something to her...but she was right. I really didn’t remember, and anything I could’ve said would’ve come out sounding insincere.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Makina. “I mean, it was ages ago!”

“But, I mean...*you* remember, right? Why not just tell me what I—” I began,

but Makina pressed a finger to my lips before I could finish.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Asking you about it again now wouldn’t be the same. That way wouldn’t help you understand how I felt back then.”

“Makina...”

“So instead, can I ask you for something else right now?”

“You want something now...? O-Of course! Totally! For shuaghph!” I shouted. I’d been granted a sudden and unexpected chance to redeem myself, and I jumped at it without a moment’s hesitation! Bit my tongue in a major way at the end, though.

“Hee hee! That’s one part of you that hasn’t changed a bit,” said Makina.

“Ugh... I’m ashamed to admit it, but yeah...”

“Don’t be! The way you were always so straightforward and threw yourself into everything you did always gave me the courage I needed to keep going,” said Makina. “You were someone I could look up to, and at the same time, you were my prince...”

“Y-Your *prince*?!”

“So I wanted to ask you for something,” she said, once again leaning over and planting her hands to either side of my head. It was like that wall-pin thing that guys do to girls on TV all the time, only with the floor instead...so, a floor pin? Er, or rather, a couch pin?

Anyway, in spite of the *very* stupid thoughts running through my mind in that moment, I returned Makina’s gaze. She was as beautiful as ever, but she wasn’t quite projecting that classic, idol-style composure. The way she looked now reminded me more of how she used to be, back when she was little and had no confidence to speak of.

“Will you listen to my request, Yotsy?” asked Makina, her tone as serious as it could be.

“Okay,” I replied with a nod. This was a request from the childhood friend who I’d already let down once, and I felt the need to throw my all into taking it just as seriously as she was. No matter what she—

“I want you to go out with me! Please!”

Oh. Okay. Huh. She wants me to go out with her. Well, if that’s her request, I guess I’ll just have to—

Wait. Go out with her? She wants me to...?

.....?

.....?!?

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

It was such a bolt from the blue—so far from *anything* I could’ve imagined she’d request—that I let out a full-force shout of shock, directly into her face, not even *noticing* that I was showering her with spit in the process. She was a nationally renowned idol! My one and only childhood friend!

And she seriously just asked me out?!

Interlude I: Yuna Momose

I noticed the text that Sakura had sent me just a little after noon. Which is to say, just a little after I got out of bed.

The night before, I hadn't been able to get to sleep no matter what I did. Just lying there felt like a waste, so I decided to buy the ebook version of this one manga I was curious about. I started reading, discovered it was even better than I'd expected, finished the volume, bought the next one, finished *that* too, and kept looping through the same cycle until I noticed that the sun was rising outside my window. Then I finally went to sleep, and by the time I woke up, half the day had passed by already. I was living a life of self-indulgence you could only get away with during summer vacation...though of course, the *old* me wouldn't have ever considered doing something like that, vacation or not.

I wonder if Yotsuba's bad habits are starting to rub off on me? I thought, then found myself smirking a second later. The truth is, I'd always been just a touch jealous of her ditzy side. She was like a little boll of cotton, drifting gently through the air wherever the breeze took her. Watching her made me think that it might be okay for *me* to live a less restrained life as well.

Of course, if she told me that she'd stayed up all night, I'd definitely lecture her about how that's awful for your skin. Still, though, I sort of hoped that we'd get the chance to stay up late into the night together someday. We'd chat about our favorite manga, watch horror movies—which *neither* of us could stand—and kick up a huge, screaming racket over them...a-and take all the time we could possibly want to flirt around, and stuff... Rinka had always been a heavy sleeper, so I knew for a fact that was one of the few periods when I'd be able to have Yotsuba all to myself.

Come on, could we please just fast-forward to the day I get to stay up with her? Maybe this is on me—maybe I should be going out of my way to make it happen sooner! It'd probably be easier to do it before school starts back up again, right? It's summer vacation right now, for crying out loud, and I know

from personal experience that it's way easier to stay up all night when you're on break, intentionally or not!

“Okay! Let’s text Yotsuba and ask how her schedule’s—ah, right! I got a text!” I said to myself. I’d finally remembered the message I’d received as I grabbed my phone and opened up my chat app.

The sender was Sakura Hazama, one of Yotsuba’s little sisters. Just after summer vacation began, our relationship with Yotsuba had been exposed to both of her younger siblings. The fact that Yotsuba was dating both me and Rinka came as a shock to them, and they ended up ostracizing their big sister...or so we’d *thought*, but I guess the issue was complicated by the fact that they had feelings for her far beyond what you’d expect from ordinary sisters.

“We won’t give her up that easily!”

Yotsuba reported that in the end, they’d settled on staying normal sisters like always, but when we actually *met* with her sisters, the things they told us were so openly aggressive, they hadn’t left much room for doubt in my mind. If I had to sum up our relationship with her sisters in short, I guess I’d have to say that we were love rivals. It wasn’t just Sakura, by the way—her other sister, Aoi, had been pretty obviously all over Yotsuba as well.

But all that said, personally speaking? I *really* wanted to get along with Sakura! She was my beloved girlfriend’s little sister, for crying out loud! Of *course* I wanted to be friends with her! And that’s not even starting on how cute she was! I wanted to convince her to accept me as her sister’s girlfriend, and just maybe get her to treat *me* as her big-sister-in-law...*but okay, that’s probably just a little too ambitious, huh?!*

So anyway, when we’d gone to the pool together that one time, Sakura and I took the chance to trade contact info, and we’d been shooting texts back and forth every now and again ever since. Sakura was in the heat of her high school entrance exam study season, luckily enough, and to make things even better, she was aiming to get into Eichou High—the school that we attended. She wound up asking me questions about her studies quite often as a result. Academics, after all, were my bread and butter! I *was* the top student in my

grade! I would've been totally okay with being her private tutor and teaching her in person, even, but I hadn't managed to move things quite that far along yet.

All of that was why I initially assumed that she was texting me about her studies again today. I opened up our chat app, psyched to know I'd have the chance to score some more points with her!

Sakura: Are you and my sister going on a date today?

"Hmmm...?"

I cocked my head. *That* sure wasn't the question I'd been expecting. We weren't, for the record—my schedule was free all day. I would never have stayed up that late if I'd had a date with Yotsuba scheduled the day after! I was reasonably confident that Rinka wasn't going out with her either. *So what gives...?*

Me: Uhh, no. Why?

My fingers trembled as I sent the message. I had a *bad* feeling about this. I *wanted* to say "Nah, she'd never," and write it off, but this was Yotsuba we were talking about, and I knew what she was like. She defied expectations and kicked common sense to the curb like no one else. I happened to adore that side of her, but at the same time, it also sorta scared me. What if someday, without any warning whatsoever, she just up and vanished without a word...?

Okay, come on. You're totally overthinking this, I told myself. By the time I'd taken a few deep breaths and calmed myself down, a reply from Sakura had arrived.

Sakura: She got all dressed up this morning, and she's been really fidgety ever since.

It felt like somebody had grabbed my heart and *squeezed*. I recognized those behaviors instantly because they were exactly how *I* acted when I was getting

ready for a date myself. And if that's what she was doing, it wasn't one with me or Rinka.

"I-It's fine! I'm sure it's nothing! She's probably just...just going out to see a friend, or something!" I told myself, but the fact that I was saying those things out loud goes to show how *not* cool I was about all of it. I was just making desperate excuses, and I knew it. It's not that I doubted Yotsuba, though! I wasn't *suspicious* that she'd be dating other people behind our backs! It's just that when I tried to figure out what she *was* doing...I drew a blank.

"She's gonna think I'm *such* a control freak if she learns I'm worrying like this," I sighed. Even if she didn't get grossed out if she learned about it, it seemed very likely that it would make her worry in turn.

"I wonder if I should tell Rinka...?" If I were the one in the dark, then I'd want to know it all. I wanted to know *everything* about Yotsuba. That said, I didn't feel great about making Rinka feel the same sort of anxiety I was now going through. It'd feel like I was foisting it off on her. *Plus, I might just be overreacting in the first place...*

I flopped down face-up onto my bed and let out a deep, weary sigh.

I was starting to get sick of how weak I could be sometimes. Before I got into high school, I thought I'd never fall this hopelessly in love with someone. Then I did, though, and found that I was weak enough to let those feelings lead me around by the nose.

"I like everything about you! I like it when you smile, and when you get that childish little grin, and when you're a little depressed, and when you're mad... I love all those expressions you make! They make me wanna see more of them!"

Yotsuba's voice rang out in my mind. That was something she'd told me just a little while after I met her. It's not like anything special had happened between us on that day. I was just feeling a little sad, I guess. I had let a mood swing get the better of me, and I wasn't very happy about it...but then there *she* was, looking me right in the eye and talking me up to my face. Honestly, she was almost a little *too* serious about it. If anyone else had given me a speech like that, I would've probably assumed they were sucking up and wouldn't have

taken it seriously, but she was just so darned *earnest* about it, I couldn't find it in myself to doubt her.

When Yotsuba gets like that about something, she really gives it her all every time. It's incredible, really...enough to make a girl jealous...

I couldn't exactly say if I'd wanted to be like her, or if I'd respected her, or what. I'd just started thinking that she was a little *different* from everyone else in a special sort of way, and eventually—no, in barely any time at all—that feeling had snowballed into a very different sort of emotion.

I wish I could see her right now. I always ended up feeling a little lonely when I thought about her. I still wondered who she was going out to see, and I still had all sorts of doubts, but when all was said and done, what I felt above all else...was that I wanted to meet with her. I wanted her to look me in the eye, to pat my cheeks and stroke my hair, and to call me by my name. I always wanted to be with her. I wanted to entrust myself to her, body and soul. But if I wanted to make those desires into reality, I knew I had to put my share of work in as well. I had to keep trying *my* hardest to make her keep loving me too.

And so, for a moment, I closed my eyes. I waited for my emotions to simmer back down...and then I picked up my phone.

“Hey, Rinka? About that next date we were planning...”

Chapter 2: Asking Out and Going Out

“Ugggh...”

Some people say that whenever you sigh, you’re letting a little bit of your own happiness escape from you. Assuming that was true, I had to wonder: Just how much happiness had I vented off into the atmosphere over the past few minutes alone? That unfortunate line of thought, however, wasn’t even close to enough to make me *stop* chain-sighing for all I was worth, and it hardly even bears mentioning that the source of my distress was Makina’s request.

“I want you to go out with me! Please!”

Looking back on it, I was kind of impressed that I hadn’t passed out on the spot. An ultra-popular idol had asked me out. Not as part of a scene in a TV show either—it was an actual, one-on-one, personal request. I’d never even dreamed that something like that could happen to me, and part of me still suspected that it actually *had* been just a dream after all. I found myself sprawled out on my bed, unable to muster up the energy to do much of anything other than vacantly think back on my encounter with Makina, over and over again.

“Ugh,” I sighed once more. I had no clue how many sighs that made. It wasn’t exactly rare for me to face problems that I didn’t know how to solve, but *this* was a head-scratcher among head-scratchers. It wasn’t exactly the same sort of problem as the ones I’d dealt with back when I first ended up dating Yuna and Rinka, or when my little sisters found out about those relationships, but it was probably on their level in terms of the sheer difficulty of the situation.

“Wait, what am I even thinking?! How are any of those even a little comparable?!” I shouted, clutching at my head and thrashing about wildly on my bed. The tantrum didn’t help get me out of my predicament, though. It actually just made me feel even more discombobulated than ever.

I already have two girlfriends...but, still...

You'd think it would've been an easy decision to make, but when I factored in the problem that *Makina* was facing, I just couldn't find it in myself to brush her off that easily.



Let's rewind to just before, y'know, *that* happened.

"I want you to go out with me! Please!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!"

Makina's request had come from so far out of left field, I couldn't stop myself from screaming. Makina, meanwhile, kept her eyes locked on me with the same steely, serious look on her face as ever.

"I know you might think I'm joking, Yotsy, but I'm very serious right now," she said.

"O-Oh...? That's, uhh, really something," I stammered. It felt like her gaze was going to consume me, and I awkwardly broke eye contact, only for Makina to reach out her hand, lay it on my cheek, and...

"Did I surprise you?"

"...Wha?"

Makina let out a giggle. Suddenly, it almost sounded like she *was* joking. I was totally taken aback, and while I failed to process what was happening, she spoke up again. "Let me guess—are you already seeing someone?"

"Ugh!" I grunted. *That's a hole in one!*

"I knew it," said Makina.

"B-But *how'd* you know?!"

"Your reaction made it so obvious, I'd have figured it out even if I *wasn't* trying to! It was written all over your face," she said as she pinched my cheek.

It was a playful sort of pinch—not *painful* at all—but still, the gesture was intimate enough that it made my heart skip a beat. "M-Makina," I began, then trailed off.

“I’m sorry,” said Makina, picking up the conversational slack. “If you’re already dating someone, then this request must really be putting you on the spot.”

“Umm, I mean...”

“But still, I have to ask anyway. Please go out with me, Yotsy!”

“Whaaaaaat?!” She’s acknowledging that I’m on the spot, but pushing forward with it anyway?!

Makina was gripping my hands in hers, her face looming *right* over mine. I was completely overwhelmed.

“It’s, umm... It’s okay if it’s just an act,” Makina said.

“An...act?” I repeated. *So I’d...be acting like I’m dating her? It’d just be a big lie? Putting on a show to convince somebody that we’re together? But then, who...?*

“The thing is,” she continued, “a magazine’s been trying to do a story about me lately.”

“Whoa! That’s amazing!” I shouted reflexively, completely failing to consider the context of the conversation. It was just such a famous-person thing to say, I couldn’t help but get hyped like the plebeian I was.

“It really isn’t,” said Makina. “It’s a huge pain, end of story.”

“O-Oh...yeah, I guess it would be.”

“I mean, I’ve more or less resigned myself to this sort of thing. The price of fame and all that. This time, though, the *reason* why they’re after me’s a bit of a hassle.”

“How’s that?”

“Basically, I had a role in a TV drama alongside a well-known actor recently, and now they’re convinced that we’re secretly in a relationship.”

“Wait, a well-known actor? You mean, like, *that* well-known actor?!” One actor in particular immediately sprang to mind. He was supposedly the most popular actor of the modern era, and had appeared in all sorts of films and TV

shows! *I think his name was, uhh...er...* “Th-That one guy!”

“You forgot his name, didn’t you.”

“Okay, but I totally know who he is! Like, if you showed me a picture of him, I’d be all ‘yeah, that guy!’ and stuff! His name just sorta slipped my mind a little bit, that’s all...”

“Hee hee!” Makina giggled. “This side of you hasn’t changed a bit, Yotsy! I always loved that about you.”

“O-Oh,” I stammered. Hearing her tell me that she loved me took on a whole different nuance now, considering she’d asked me out just minutes beforehand, and it made me feel really weirdly bashful. *No wonder virtually all Japanese men and women from the ages of ten to fifty have a thing for her!*

“Anyway, the rumor about us dating isn’t even slightly true,” she continued. “The thing is, though, that the longer it drags on, the bigger an issue it’ll be for him. Plus, the reporters won’t stop following me around until it’s all cleared up...”

Oh, right. That makes sense. Makina had only just announced her hiatus from show business and finally had the chance to focus on her academic life, but the paparazzi stalking her everywhere would make concentrating on school totally impossible.

“That’s why I’m asking you for this,” said Makina. “It’s totally okay if it’s just an act! As long as you can pretend you’re dating me, it’ll solve everything!”

“Makina...” I said, then paused to think. “Wait. Wouldn’t that mean that I might end up in that magazine?!”

“Nope! You’re part of the general public, so even if you ended up in an article, they’d redact your name and blur out your face in all the pictures. They’re pretty thorough about these things. Not even people who know you would be able to tell!”

“Oh, huh. I had no idea that’s how it works!” *Wow, she really knows her stuff! You can tell she’s totally got a handle on all this showbiz business!* “But wait, though—I’m a girl! Wouldn’t pretending to go out with a guy be more convincing from, like, a society-at-large sorta perspective?”

“Not at all! Love and gender have nothing to do with each other! I happen to know a few people in the business who’re in same-sex relationships, as a matter of fact.”

“O-Oh, huh,” I said. I most certainly was *not* in the business, but speaking as a girl who was dating other girls, that tidbit hit me on a pretty personal level.

“Plus, the rumor about me was pure, baseless speculation from the very beginning,” Makina continued. “All I have to do to change it is provide a story that’s just as newsworthy, but actually has something to back it up.”

“But, I mean... You’d be backing it up with a lie, right? Would that really work...?”

“Don’t worry! I’m sure you could make it happen. In fact, you’re the *only* one who could make it happen!”

“Huh...?”

“I know that I’m being selfish right now, but please, Yotsy! I get that it’s an unreasonable request, but would you at least think it through before you turn me down?” she pleaded, squeezing my hands and staring me right in the eye. Her gaze was overwhelmingly dazzling, and once again, I felt like it might suck me right in.

“Makina... O-Okay,” I said before I even realized what I was doing—or, really, what I was being compelled to do. “I can’t say yes right away, but I’ll think about it! I’ll take it into super careful consideration!”

“Thank you so much, Yotsy. I’ll wait, of course. Until you’ve found your answer...I’ll be waiting.”

Makina smiled at me, but this time, the expression looked just a little forced. Seeing that smile made me feel an uncomfortable tightness in my chest that I just couldn’t ignore, no matter how hard I tried.



In the end, that tight, stinging pain had lingered on throughout the rest of the day. I *wanted* to help Makina, but even if it was all an act, I couldn’t shake the feeling that it might be a betrayal as far as Yuna and Rinka were concerned. I

tried to imagine how *I'd* feel if *they* had to pretend to be dating somebody else...and, I mean, a person like *me* getting jealous would be downright absurd, but I can still say with certainty that I wouldn't be *happy* about it.

But on the other hand, prioritizing the two of them would mean turning my back on Makina, wouldn't it...? I could only imagine how incredibly stressful it must be to have reporters constantly hounding her like that. If there was something I could do to resolve the situation, then turning a blind eye and ignoring her would be just plain awful of me.

"Agggh! I'm so stuck between a rock and a hard place here—bwaugh?!" I shouted then shrieked, respectively, as I rolled right off my bed. It really hurt, but sadly, the pain did nothing to distract me from my problems.

"I wonder if I would've said yes in a heartbeat if I *weren't* dating them?" I muttered to myself. It wasn't a *real* question, honestly. I was mostly just trying to escape from reality.

Makina was a wonderful girl. Even if you ignored the fact that she was a nationally renowned idol beloved by all and sundry, everything about her made hanging out with her fun, from her mature mannerisms to the way she talked. Being with her put me at ease. She'd changed in all sorts of ways since we were together in kindergarten, sure, but the things that I loved about her back then hadn't all gone away, and it felt like we could easily pick up our friendship where we'd left off.

"I bet Makina feels the same way. She'd never have asked *me* for something like that otherwise," I sighed. In all likelihood, Makina hadn't noticed what a screwup I was yet. It almost felt like I was swindling her by not clueing her in to my true nature, but on the other hand, a part of me wanted to keep the pretense up for as long as possible. "Ugggh...!"

"Yotsuba...?" a nervous voice rang out.

"Gah! Sakura?! And Aoi too?!" I yelped, bolting upright. My door had been cracked open, and my sisters were gingerly peeking in at me! "Wh-What's going on?"

"That's what *we* want to know," said Aoi. "It sounded like you were banging on the walls in there!"

“M-My bad,” I mumbled.

“Did something happen?” Aoi continued. “Does it have anything to do with you going out earlier today?”

“Uh, well, I mean...”

“Looks like she doesn’t want to tell us, Aoi,” said Sakura. “Apparently, we wouldn’t be able to help even if she tried opening up to us.”

“That’s not what I mean at all!” I shouted reflexively, but then it hit me: they were good-cop-bad-copping me! Aoi was making herself look nice by playing up how worried about me she was, while Sakura was coming from the opposite direction by acting all distant and uncaring! I didn’t want to make Aoi upset, and I didn’t want to make Sakura feel disappointed in me, and with those factors both weighing on my mind, I only had one choice: be the big sister I was always meant to be and tell them everything that—

N-No, wait a minute! I can’t tell them about this, no matter what happens!

It was *already* a miracle that they’d been willing to tolerate my two-timing. If I broached the prospect of adding *another* girlfriend into the equation—even if my relationship with her *was* only an act—and if I told them that the girl in question was their beloved Maki Amagi, they’d both fly into a panic for sure! That last piece of info in particular seemed all but guaranteed to make the two of them assume I’d gone insane, or at least prompt them to accuse me of telling super obvious lies.

If I ever tell them about this, it’s gonna have to be after I introduce them to Maki...er, I mean, Makina! And actually, I should be pretty careful about that too. I’ll need to figure out how they feel about her hiatus before I take any big steps...

“Yotsuba?” said Sakura and Aoi together.

“Ah! Sorry! What?!” I yelped.

“‘What’ yourself! You were spacing out again,” said Sakura.

“That wasn’t even the first time we tried to get your attention,” added Aoi.

“Ugh... My bad,” I said. I’d started brooding on accident again and made them

even more suspicious than ever in the process. *What should I do? I mean, I've gotta do something before this spirals out of control...but it's not that easy! I don't have any decent ideas, and I definitely can't see any springing to mind anytime soon!*

"Are you really that dead set against talking about it?" asked Sakura.

"It's not that I don't *want* to talk about it," I said. "It's just, well, it's kind of a touchy subject, I guess..."

"Don't tell me...it's another romance problem?" asked Aoi.

"N-Noooope, no waaay!" *And I'm not lying! This isn't a romance thing. It's a friendship thing! Just gals being pals!*

"Hmm."

Now that was a flat "hmm"! They're totally staring a hole in me! That's a pair of mega-suspicious stares if I've ever seen one!

A moment of uncomfortable silence later, Sakura sighed. "Well, if it's *that* touchy of a topic, I won't pry."

"Huh? Sakura?" I said, stunned.

"I'm good too, in that case," said Aoi.

"Right? No point being too insistent about it. That'll just make her upset with us."

H-Holy moly, my sisters are so understanding! Compared to them, I look like...well, like total trash! Ugh. "Sorry to make you guys worry," I mumbled as I gave them a deep bow of apology. As I saw them off to their own rooms, I reflected on the fact that my little sisters were probably even more mature than me, at this point.

Bvvt, bvvt!

"Whaugh?!" I yelped as my phone picked that *precise* moment to start vibrating! *Is it Sakura and Aoi again? Are they back for round two?!* I thought as I pulled it out to check.

"...Ah." I was wrong. My phone's screen wasn't displaying either of their

names. Instead, it said Yuna Momose.

“Wait. *Yuna*?!” I yelped as I realized what I was seeing, then answered the phone in a flash! “Hello?!”

“Ah, hello? Is that you, Yotsuba?”

“Wha—*Rinka*?!” I yelped once more as I realized whose voice I was hearing. *But wait, why’s Rinka calling me on Yuna’s phone?*

“Oh, come *on*, Rinka!” a second voice rang out. “You weren’t even *trying* to sound like me! Of course she’d figure it out right away like that!”

“Oh, whoops.”

That second voice was Yuna for sure! I guess they must be together?

“Sorry about that, Yotsuba,” said Yuna. “I was *hoping* to drag it out and let you slowly figure out something was off as the conversation went on, but so much for that.”

“Th-That’s fine! It’s okay! And besides, I would’ve been able to figure out it was Rinka’s voice even if she *had* tried to sound like you!” I was very confident about that. Whether it was Rinka trying to sound like Yuna or Yuna trying to sound like Rinka, I knew for a fact that I’d notice in an instant! Not that I’d ever tried before now! “But anyway, what’s up?” I asked.

“Oh, right, of course! I almost forgot the important part,” said Rinka. “We wanted to talk to you about the date the three of us have planned soon.”

“The date,” I muttered. That, of course, would be the date that my little sisters had apparently learned about. The three of us had promised to go out together the day after tomorrow. We hadn’t decided where yet, though—it was still just a vague promise to go *somewhere*, as things stood.

“So, we had an idea,” said Yuna. “How about we go to the pool?”

“The pool?” I repeated, almost following it up with, “Again?” We’d only just gone to the pool with my little sisters recently.

“You just thought ‘again?’ didn’t you?” said Yuna.

“Bwuh?”

“Heh heh! I could tell too,” added Rinka.

The conversation paused for a moment as I listened to the two of them snicker together. I thought I’d kept the unspoken question, well, unspoken, but it seemed they’d seen right through my reaction. I could tell their voices apart with ease, and they could read me like a book in return.

“We had Sakura and Aoi along with us last time, right?” said Yuna. “We had to spend the whole time acting like we were just friends and all.”

“And that was fun, don’t get me wrong!” said Rinka. “But since we went out of our way to buy new swimsuits and everything, we, well...we were hoping to get to spend time in them with you on a *proper* date too.”

Schwick!

That, in case you were wondering, was the sound of her words piercing my heart straight through like Cupid’s own arrow! Rinka was trying so hard to sound calm, but her nervous excitement came through in her voice so clearly anyway, and it was just the *cutest* thing, I swear! If she’d been in the same room as me, I might’ve ended up patting her on the head reflexively!

But then again... I thought as Makina’s face materialized in my mind’s eye. Was it really okay for me to go out on a date when I hadn’t given her a clear response yet? And if I *did* go out with things still ambiguous, would I really be able to enjoy it properly? *And that’s not even starting on the trouble that all this could cause Yuna and Rinka, in the worst case...*

In spite of my apprehensions, though...I just really, really wanted to go! I’d been in big-sister mode last time we went to the pool, and I had to dial back the affection and stay in friend mode with Yuna and Rinka. It took everything I had—and I really do mean *everything*—to stop myself from staring at Yuna’s cute swimsuit and gaping at Rinka’s sexy one, and if at all possible, I wanted to spend every second I possibly could appreciating them in all their glory, burning the images so thoroughly into my mind I could never forget them! *But, but, but—*

I was stuck in a perpetual loop of excitement segueing into depression and back again. I genuinely had no clue what I was supposed to do, and the angel and devil that would usually show up at times like these to help me resolve my internal conflicts were nowhere to be seen, so I was left to keep running around

in mental circles on my own, spinning my wheels until a slight sense of nausea started to set in, and—

“Uh...Yotsuba?”

“Ah!”

Yuna’s voice had finally snapped me out of it. She sounded a little timid, or nervous, maybe, like she was concerned about me. I felt a tightness in my chest as I realized that, even over the phone, she must’ve been able to sense that something was wrong. I’d made her worry about me.

I really am hopeless. As a friend, as a big sister, and as a girlfriend too... I’d been clumsy and socially inept from the very beginning, but still, I always tried to do my best at everything, even if it would inevitably all go wrong and end with me blaming myself for being so useless. But it’s not like all that started just now, did it? I’ve always been this way, and all I can do is keep moving forward like the clumsy moron I am, giving everything I do everything I’ve got, no matter what! And right now, that means giving my girlfriends the answer they’re waiting for!

“Yeah, let’s go! That sounds great! Let’s head to the pool, just the three of us!” I said. This time, we’d be there as *girlfriends*, for a proper date!

Now that I’d finally gotten my feelings through to them, I heard Yuna and Rinka both sigh with relief.

“Oh, thank goodness,” said Rinka.

“It’s settled, then!” said Yuna. “We can eat lunch there, sooo...how’s meeting up at the station at ten sound to you?”

“That sounds great! I can’t wait!” I said, and with that, our phone call came to an end.

I didn’t want to make Makina wait too long for my answer...*but for now, I’ve gotta focus on my date with Yuna and Rinka! Then when that’s all finished, I’ll take the time to give Makina’s request the thought it deserves!*

With a plan in mind, I set about preparing for my date way, way sooner than I realistically had to.



Two days passed by, and the time arrived!

“All right! Maybe I’m actually the first to show up for once?” I said to myself. I’d made it to the station an hour ahead of our meeting time, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I glanced around and saw no sign of Yuna or Rinka yet.

This might sound weird, but I was actually pretty fond of waiting. I also didn’t want to make the two of them wait for *me*, of course, but the biggest reason why I’d arrived so far ahead of time was that I wanted to linger around for a while, basking in the gleeful anticipation of what was to come. Just thinking about it made my mood start to sky—

“Ah, Yotsubaaa!”

Skyrocket. It made my mood skyrocket...

“Well, you’re certainly as early as ever! I was so sure that Yuna and I would beat you here this time.”

“You’re *early*!!!”

“*Huh?!*” Yuna and Rinka gasped, their eyes wide with shock at my sudden and inexplicable objection. Which, to be clear, was totally a reasonable reaction for them to have, but I was still gonna make my case, unreasonable or not!

“I wanted to be all *excited* for longer!” I whined.

“Y-Yotsuba?” said Rinka.

“A date starts *way* before the actual start of the date, you know?! Like the time you spend picking out what clothes you’ll wear, and thinking up things to talk about, and all that stuff! Getting all nervous while you wait for your date to show up’s a *super* important part of the date too!”

In the face of my irrational and outrageous argument, Yuna and Rinka paused for a moment to glance at each other, then turned back to me and shouted in unison. “That’s *our* line!!!”

“Bwuh?!”

“*We* got here an hour early too, you know?!” shouted Yuna.

“Do you think we can just snap our fingers and instantly be emotionally prepared for a day out with you?! Because we can’t!” insisted Rinka.

“Wha, bwuh, wha?!” I blubbered incoherently, overwhelmed in a second.

“I was so excited for today, I couldn’t sleep a wink last night!” said Yuna.

“I can *never* sleep on the nights before our dates!” added Rinka.

“W-Well, neither can I,” I said, weakly echoing their protests...and then all of us broke out into a fit of spontaneous laughter.

“Ha ha ha! Why are we *bragging* about all this, seriously?!” Yuna cackled.

“The three of us certainly are on the same wavelength,” said Rinka.

“No kidding! Now I’m starting to feel stupid for worrying so much!” said Yuna.

“Huh? Wait, you were worried about something?” I asked.

“Hmm—yeah, but y’know, now that we’re together, I just can’t bring myself to care anymore.”

“Wait, what does *that* mean?!” *What, am I such an over-the-top scatterbrain you can’t be bothered to care about stuff when you’re around me? I mean, I can’t deny it, but still! Man!*

“Well, anyway, seeing as we’ve all ended up showing up an hour early, wanna head out?” Yuna suggested.

“That sounds good to me,” said Rinka. “After all, that means I’ll have a whole extra hour to be with Yotsuba today.”

“Uhh, *excuse* me? You know *I’m* here too, right?” Yuna pouted.

Meanwhile I just stood back, watched them banter, and reflected on how adorable my girlfriends—*ah! Oh, jeez! I don’t think they’ve noticed, but we’re attracting a ton of attention here!*

This isn’t exactly news at this point, but Yuna and Rinka were both eye-catching beauties, and putting the two of them together in public like this was just asking for people to pay attention to them. I guess I was technically part of the group, so it was arguably the *three* of us who people were watching, but I could easily tell that *I* wasn’t the one attracting all those gazes. Which was a

given, okay?! I wasn't gonna go getting depressed about it *now*, okay?!

"C'mon, guys, let's go! I don't wanna waste a second!" I said, taking the two of them by the hand and pulling them off before they could reply. Rinka gasped and Yuna let out a little squeak. Part of me was still worried about how people would perceive us, but I was way more concerned about the prospect of fixating on the bystanders and wasting time as a result. I was set on having as much fun today as possible!



One thirty-minute train ride later, we arrived at our perfectly unremarkable local pool! Well, the pool itself was unremarkable, but this being the height of summer vacation, the place was still packed with visitors, most of them accompanied by their families. It was a reasonably priced and fun way to spend a day, after all—my family had brought me here on quite a few occasions while I was growing up as well.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Yotsuba," said Rinka.

"Let's get going," said Yuna, who'd finished getting ready at just about the same time.

"All right!" I said, and with that, the three of us headed out from the locker room.

I don't remember how this place used to work all that well, but nowadays, the locker keys had these little barcodes attached to them that let you buy stuff from the stalls and vending machines inside the pool facility on credit. It would keep track of everything for you, and you paid for it all at the end of your visit when you checked out. That meant there was no need to carry your wallet around and you were free to wander about the place empty-handed! I was the sort of person who was totally okay with stashing her phone in the lockers, so that was an especially huge upside in my book.

Yuna hummed happily as she walked along, and Rinka looked back at me and said, "Come on, Yotsuba! Let's go, let's go!" Each of them grabbed one of my hands and pulled me forward. They were both in the highest of spirits—actually, they were acting like a couple of little kids who couldn't contain their excitement. When we'd come here before, my sisters had each claimed one of

my arms, leaving Yuna and Rinka to follow along behind us. Maybe they'd secretly wished they could walk side by side with me back then as well?

One way or another, when they went into full-on girlfriends mode, Yuna and Rinka both seemed to regress a few years, mentally speaking. Not that I'm complaining! They were super cute when they acted that way, so I was totally cool with it! Anyway, the three of us decided to start things off with an old pool standby: drifting along in the lazy river! Before that, though, I had a side stop to make.

"Hee hee, check it out! I borrowed a swimming ring!" I said as I showed off my new acquisition. I'd gone for a pretty big one, easily large enough to fit an adult sitting atop it and maybe one or two more clinging to its sides.

"Oh, right... You can't swim, can you?" said Yuna.

"Y-Yeah, I can! As long as my feet can touch the ground, I mean..."

"Well, you're clearly capable of floundering, at least," Rinka jabbed.

Mnh, come on, you two! They were both acting as if my not being able to swim was a given. *Come to think of it, didn't Koganezaki jump straight to the same assumption back when I talked with her about swimming? Maybe I should just write "can't swim" into my part of the character profile page and get it over with!*

"I could teach you, if you want?" Rinka offered.

"Huh?!" I grunted, instantly conflicted. I mean, think about it: Rinka was *incredible*. Everyone knew that she was as athletic as a person could be, and that fact applied just as firmly underwater as it did on dry land. She was a veritable mermaid who'd come ashore to walk the land! A centaur who'd conquered the seas! A, uh...okay, no, I have no idea what I'm even saying at this point.

Anyway, the point is that she was a super fast swimmer with super beautiful form—enough so to get the attention of everyone on our school's swimming team! Who could even say what would happen if I had someone like her teach me how to swim? For all I knew, I might wind up sprouting flippers! But, that said, there was also another, much more terrible possibility.

“Wait, think about it! Imagine if I had someone as amazing at swimming as you teach me...and then I still couldn’t swim at the end anyway! Wouldn’t that mean I’m, like, *super* hopeless?!”

“...”

“...Uh?”

Yuna and Rinka had both gone totally silent. I’ll admit, it was kind of pathetic of me to say it like that, but I was *pretty* sure I had a solid point! *What’s going on...?*

“Uh, Yotsuba?” said Yuna. “Isn’t it a little late to be worrying about stuff like that?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you had me—the top student in our grade level and a total prodigy—teaching you school stuff for *how* long without managing to pass your classes?”

“*Ugah!*”

“Oh, and remember that one time you asked Rinka to teach you how to run faster?”

“Ah, right... I didn’t manage to help very much in the end, did I?”

“*Ugaaaugh?!!*” The way Rinka had phrased it so carefully to make it sound like it hadn’t been *my* fault made it all the more painful to hear! They were right, though. It was *way* too late to start worrying about me being super hopeless. The cold, hard truth was that there were some things I’d never be able to do, even with incredibly qualified teachers like them backing me up! After a year of watching me as closely as they had, that was apparently super obvious from their perspective. “So, wait—doesn’t that mean I’m gonna be a hopeless small fry no matter *what* I do?!”

“Well, I mean...”

“Hmm...”

“You might as well just come out and say yes, at this point!”

As I reeled from the mild case of utter hopelessness brought about by my

girlfriends not sparing my ego the slightest hint of consideration, I took my swim ring and dove straight into the lazy river—or rather, slipped quietly into the lazy river to make sure I didn’t splash anyone who happened to be nearby.



“Ahh, this is sooo niiice...”

“Hah hah—you sound ridiculous, Yotsuba!” Rinka laughed.

“I know, right? And just look at that cute little face she’s making!” Yuna exclaimed.

I’d slotted myself right into my swim ring and was now drifting along in a state of total and complete relaxation. Meanwhile, Yuna and Rinka were on either side of me, poking and prodding at my cheeks. The three of us were making the most of this calm, laid-back moment, enjoying it to the fullest as the lazy river swept us along. *It sorta feels like time’s standing still, or something*, I thought to myself, and I almost started slipping away into a doze when Yuna spoke up.

“Oh, by the way, Yotsuba.”

“Hmm...?”

“Did you *really* French-kiss Rinka?”

“Bwahuh?!” *Oh my god, was that ever a straight ball to the face out of absolutely nowhere!*

“Oh, don’t worry! It’s fine, honestly! I heard allll about it from Rinka already. Isn’t that *right*, Rinkaaa?”

“Ugh,” Rinka grunted with a slight grimace.

Yuna’s words were carrying a weird sort of pressure all of a sudden. *I’m, uh, really not getting the sense that it’s fine at all, actually!*

“Rinka was on cloud nine for *days* after your date with her that one time, see,” said Yuna. “I figured that *something* must’ve happened, and when I tried casually prompting her, she spilled the beans right away.”

“S-Sorry, Yotsuba,” said Rinka.

“No, it’s okay! I mean, it wasn’t like it was a secret or anything!” I quickly

countered. “It just sorta happened, right? Like, we were in the right place and the right time, and, y’know...”

“I said it was fine, didn’t I? It’s not like I wasn’t thinking about doing that with you someday too!” Yuna said, then gave me a long, appraising glance...and grinned! “And hey, we might as well make ‘someday’ right now, don’t you think?”

“R-Right now?!” Rinka and I yelped in unison. The swim float rocked in the water as both of us had a little freak-out.

“B-But didn’t we promise that we’d only kiss when it’s just the two of us...?” I said.

“Hey, I might be okay with Rinka getting the jump on me here, but that doesn’t mean I wanna stay behind her forever!” said Yuna. “We can temporarily put that rule on ice! I don’t imagine Rinka will have any complaints about that, right?”

“Ugh... Well, no, I suppose I won’t,” said Rinka, folding instantly.

Wait, no—but—I mean—well. It struck me that butting into this particular exchange would be a great way to make things even messier than ever. *Still, though—kissing here? And French kissing, at that?! That can’t possibly be okay!*

“Surely even you know that if you’re going to break the rules, you need to stay on guard and make sure you don’t attract attention to yourself in the process?”

I remembered what Koganezaki had told me back when she helped me figure out how to deal with my little sisters’ discovery of my two-timing. It had left such an impression on me that I could still remember her advice word for word. In fact, it would be on the shortlist for the wisest words I’d ever had the privilege of receiving!

If we acted like we were dating while we were out and about—even if it was just me and Yuna *or* Rinka, one-on-one—there was always a possibility that somebody we knew would witness us. I’d already had my cover blown with my sisters, and they were two of the most important people in the world as far as I was concerned, so I didn’t really have much of anything left to be afraid of. Yuna and Rinka, however, weren’t necessarily in the same boat. They both had

way more to lose than I did, and if they really did end up losing it all on account of me...I mean, not that I think that someone like *me* could *ever* make them lose it all! They were *way* too great for that to be possible! But, like, still, I couldn't risk that one-in-a-million chance, so I really couldn't just—

“As long as we do it somewhere where nobody's going to see us,” I said.

“Huh?!” Yuna gasped.

A lengthy silence ensued.

“...Huh?” I grunted. *Wait, what did I just say? It'd be bad if somebody saw us, so we just have to go somewhere where nobody'll be able to see—is that the logic here? And is it just me, or is Yuna getting a kinda weird look in her eyes now?*

“O-Okay, then let's find somewhere right now! There's gotta be *somewhere* around here where nobody else'll be around!” Yuna shouted.

“Y-Yuna? Calm down, okay...?” said Rinka.

“Calm down? Are you *kidding* me?! Yotsuba said it was okay, so how am I supposed to be calm?! You wanna do it too, don't you?!”

“Yes.”

Wow! Zero hesitation!

“But is there anywhere nearby we could actually go for some privacy?” Rinka continued.

“Barely anywhere in this pool's grounds, that's for sure,” said Yuna. “There's the toilet stalls, or the showers, I guess...but I don't wanna do it somewhere like that! I wanna do it somewhere with *atmosphere!*”

I paused for a moment to reflect on the fact that we were having this conversation while drifting down a lazy river. Families were frolicking and couples flirting all around us, and to them, we probably (I mean, I think, anyway) just looked like a group of close friends. What on earth would they think if they knew how hot and heavy our conversation was getting?

“Okay, then,” said Rinka. “How about a hotel?”

“Fwahaugh?!”

“That’s *it*, Rinka! Excellent idea!”

A h-hotel?! Does she mean, like, one of those hotels? The ones where adults go to do adult things?!



“I didn’t think you’d be the one to suggest something like that, though,” Yuna continued.

“W-Well, it’s not like I’m *not* interested in...that sort of thing. And it was the first place that came to mind where nobody would be able to interrupt us,” Rinka mumbled bashfully as she turned her head away from us. I could still see that she was blushing, though. A staff member had interrupted us and spoiled the mood (unintentionally, I’m sure) when we went to karaoke together the other day, and I had a feeling she was trying to make sure we didn’t have a repeat of that incident. Rinka was so nice like that.

Then again, we probably wouldn’t have been able to slam on the brakes back then if it weren’t for the disruption. If we got into one of those moods in a place where nobody could possibly interrupt us... I couldn’t honestly say just how far we’d end up going under circumstances like those, regardless of whether we were in the right sort of atmosphere for it or not.

“D-Don’t you think we should wait until we’re a little older for that sort of stuff...?” I said before I even knew what I was doing. I was *very* obviously looking for an escape route. It was such a classic move from me, you’d think they’d start calling me Yotsuba the Runner, really.

Yuna puffed out her cheeks irritably. “Look, Yotsuba,” she said, “if you keep thinking along those lines, you’ll be an old lady before you get around to doing *anything*, you know? There’s no way to tell whether you’re old enough for something until you’ve given it a try and seen how it goes!”

“O-Oh, *wow*,” I muttered, marveling at just how cool my girlfriend could be sometimes. Her advice carried the sort of weight you’d expect from the wise words of an eminent sage! They’d surpassed Koganezaki’s advice on my wise-words shortlist in a heartbeat!

“All right, I think that settles it!” said Yuna. “Sounds like we have something to look forward to after we’re finished swimming!”

“I’ll second that,” Rinka quietly added after a moment of hesitation.

It was two versus one, and the principles of democracy meant that the motion had passed by a majority vote. *Is this okay, though...? Is this really*

okay?! I mean, we're still high schoolers, aren't we?! High school's supposed to be, like, a period of transition between childhood and adulthood! It's the era of your life in which you're most likely to let your guard down and make stupid mistakes that you'll have to carry with you for a lifetime! The mistakes you make in high school will come back to haunt you all over the place down on the road...or at least, I'm pretty sure somebody said that on TV at some point!

"You *do* remember that we're all girls, right, Yotsuba?" said Yuna.

"Huh?"

"In other words, even if we *do* cross the ultimate line, we won't have to worry about any super crazy repercussions!"

"!!!"

Yuna's words landed like a bolt of lightning directly to my brain. The problem that I'd been so apprehensive about was, in short, one you see come up all the time in school-life dramas (well, a certain sort of school-life drama, anyway). A youthful indiscretion would lead to an unintended pregnancy, and both families would get caught up in a finger-pointing drama bomb, with the couple inevitably dropping out of high school to elope! I wasn't about to inflict such a tragedy on Yuna or Rinka through my careless actions. I was totally inept and totally incapable of resisting temptation, and *I* trusted myself least of anyone when it came to these things! But, all that said...

When she puts it that way, she's right! Girls can't get each other pregnant! Whether or not that's a good thing on the whole was a question I wasn't even remotely prepared to answer, but what it *did* mean was that the whole scenario that had been playing out in my mind wasn't something I had to worry about after all. And what *that* meant was, well... "So then, does that mean we can cross as many lines as we feel like?"

"Yes!"

"Waugh?!"

Yuna and Rinka had shouted their answer out in such perfect unison, it almost felt like they'd seen my question coming a mile away. *Well, all right, then... I guess I don't have anything to worry about after all? But, like...hmm. I dunno...*

It still felt like I had to have *something* left to really think through before I went any further, and right around the time I started clutching at my head like I always do...

“Eeek?!”

...I leaned a little too far forward, upset my swim ring’s balance, and flipped the whole thing over, sending me plunging into the drink!

“Yotsuba?!”

“Yotsuba!”

I could hear the burbling of the water around me, and I heard Yuna and Rinka shout my name. They sounded weirdly far away and muffled, though, and before I knew it...



...I found myself somewhere completely ambiguous.

Wait, what? Somewhere completely ambiguous?! What does that even mean?! This is terrifying! Does...does that mean I just straight up drowned?! Nooo! Lemme go! I wanna go hooome!!!

“Hazama.”

Huh? I know that voice... Koganezaki?! What are you doing here?!

“You have to ask? Aren’t you the one who called me here?”

I called her here...? Wait, did I really?

“More to the point, I am not, in fact, Mai Koganezaki.”

Huuuh?! But that doesn’t make any sense! No matter how you slice it, that’s Koganezaki’s voice—wait, is it a voice?

“I’m—well, you know what I am. It’s like the angel and devil thing.”

The angel and devil thing?! So, you’re saying this is...like the angel and devil thing?!

“You literally just said the same thing twice.”

Okay, but, I mean, if this is one of those things, then where are the angel and

the devil? Why would Koganezaki be here instead...?

“Previously, the angel and devil’s purpose was to help you determine what course of action would be right for you to take. They were the embodiment of your sense of reason and your desires, respectively.”

R-Right. That scans, probably.

“In practice, though, the devil won more or less every time. It’s become clear that you’re completely incapable of winning against your desires. You’re like an actual monkey.”

A monkey... Me, the chimpanzee...

“But now, you’ve once again encountered a significant internal conflict. The topic at hand, in short: whether or not it’s all right for you to have sex with the Sacrosanct.”

To have se—?! Y-You can’t just say that, Koganezaki! That’s so vulgar!

“Again, I am not Mai Koganezaki. I am a recreation of her given form by your own subconscious. Also, no, you’re vulgar.”

I wasn’t thinking about it using words like that, though! That’s so blunt! I was just thinking about, umm...doing sexy stuff with them.

“That’s the same thing.”

Is not! It’s got a totally different ring to it! “Sexy” makes it sound more cute and less intense!

“Is ‘cute’ really desirable when it comes to this topic...? Well, have it your way. The point is that you’re currently conflicted about whether or not it’s all right for you to do so, and that you are seeking an answer. If we were to leave arbitration up to your angel and devil, though, the odds are ten to one that your devil would win and you’d decide to have se—do sexy things with them. There’s no point in being internally conflicted if the result of said conflict is set in stone before it even plays out.”

This is kinda off topic, but man, it feels really weird to hear Koganezaki’s voice say “sexy”! Isn’t it kinda amazing that I can imagine it so vividly? Maybe there’s more potential hidden away in my brain than I give myself credit for...?

“Listen to me.”

Right. Sorry.

“Technically speaking, I’m what’s left of your conscience...or, to put it a different way, I’m your sense of anxiety that Mai Koganezaki might get mad at you.”

Wow! It’s kinda pathetic that my sense of anxiety’s giving me advice...but yeah, I could believe it. I’m a super sad little small fry who’s constantly cowering away from the judging gazes of the people around me, after all!

“Why do you sound proud about that?”

Koganezaki—or rather, I—swooped in to poke holes in my train of thought. Considering the sheer ruthlessness with which she went about it, I had to imagine that I was actually *really* scared of her somewhere deep down in my psyche. I’d had plenty of chances to talk with her lately, of course, and I’d come to realize that she was actually a super nice person once you got to know her, but that just made my desire to *not* make her hate me all the stronger.

Koganezaki was, broadly speaking, completely uninterested in me as a person. The only thing that could direct her attention toward me would be if I caused a situation involving the Sacrosanct—that is to say, Yuna, Rinka, or both of them at once. She was, after all, the vice president of the Sacrosanct’s fan club! She was the whole organization’s number two! And I got the feeling that she had a more personal interest in the two of them as well... Anyway, if she learned that I’d done something that ended up hurting the two of them—

“She would most certainly murder you.”

Gyaaah?!

“Well, perhaps that’s a little excessive. Let’s say she would almost certainly murder you.”

It sort of feels like we’ve gone from a hundred percent chance of death to a ninety-nine percent chance of death... B-But, I mean, she didn’t go ballistic on me when she learned about my two-timing!

“That was only because you going out with the two of them did not, in fact,

end up damaging their friendship or destabilizing the relationship that makes the two of them the Sacrosanct.”

Okay, so if I do it with both of them at once—

“Are you even listening to yourself?”

I-I know, okay?! I realize I’m being ridiculous! And wait, you’re me, aren’t you?! You’re just a part of my brain wearing Koganezaki’s skin, right?! Why do you have to sound so genuinely gosh-darned disdainful when you talk to me?!

“Well, fine. Let’s assume, hypothetically, that you managed to go through with something that outrageous and, in doing so, preserved the equilibrium between the three of you, keeping your relationships fair and balanced. Even if we assume you could manage all of that, I still wouldn’t recommend it.”

Wh-Why not?

“It goes without saying that you have no sexual experience, and it seems safe to assume the same applies to the two of them as well. If you were to try it once, think, ‘Oh, so that’s how it is,’ and that was all that came of it, then that would be all well and good. If, however, you were to become fixated upon the act, unable to think of anything other than doing the deed with your girlfriends day in and day out, and paying daily visits to both of their houses for your secretive trysts, you might find yourself in a much less comfortable position long-term.”

Wh-Wh-Whoa, holy crap! Koganezaki?!

“Yuna Momose’s grades could drop, Rinka Aiba could lose her athletic edge, and the two of them could abandon their sacred dignity in favor of developing their sexual prowess, all for the sake of simple, fleeting pleasure. The Sacrosanct would fall to pieces, needless to say, and Mai Koganezaki would blow a gasket. Everything you’d done would be exposed for the world to see, and the name Yotsuba Hazama would be spread to the far corners of the Earth as a dirty two-timer, wanted everywhere for her crimes, thus forcing you into a life of permanent exile as you do your best to outrun the bounty hunters who’re after your—”

Stop! Stoop! Don’t you think you’re making some crazy out-there leaps of logic, here?!

"I suppose I can't deny that I may have been hyperbolizing ever so slightly... All right, then, allow me to propose an alternative scenario."

Kogane paused briefly to clear her throat.

"They might dump you because you totally suck in bed."

Th-That's completely plausible!!!

"Cases of couples or spouses seeing their relations devolve on account of sexual incompatibility are supposedly not at all uncommon, according to things I've heard from people," said Koganezaki, who—it's important to remember—was me on the inside. That would explain why she'd been a little lacking on data at the end there and resorted to citing what sounded more like an urban legend than hard facts. I *had* heard stories like that all over the place online and on TV, though!

That's right...I suck at studying, I suck at sports, and I basically suck at life in general! Me being good in bed is even less likely than me winning the lottery in a single attempt!

"The two of them have very high expectations for you. You'll have to perform quite well if you want to live up to them."

B-But that's impossible, isn't it?! It'll be my first time and everything!

"And that's exactly why you shouldn't rush this. Right now, you should draw the line at kissing and start preparing yourself for the real thing. Your goal right now should be to accumulate as much knowledge as possible in regard to what it takes to pleasure a woman."

I get it...! You really are amazing, Koganezaki! That's incredible advice!

"Again, for the record, I'm not actually Mai Koganezaki."

I could go into this thinking that it would probably work out, or that I'd be able to make it up on the fly, but if I leapt in headfirst with that sort of carefree attitude and lost the two of them in the process, I'd never get over it. I might end up making them wait a little longer than they'd like doing things this way, sure, but people *do* always talk about how important your first time is and everything...

Wait for me, Yuna, Rinka! I promise...I'm gonna do everything I can to prepare myself for this!

I suppose you could say that I'd found myself a goal. I knew what I had to do before that fateful moment finally came.

I'm gonna be the queen of all things sexy!



"Gonna be...queen..."

"Yotsuba? Yotsuba!" Yuna's voice called.

"Mnnmnggh?"

Rinka's voice sighed, "Oh, thank goodness. Are you okay, Yotsuba?"

"Huh...? What's wrong, you two...?" I asked as I pried my eyes open.

Yuna and Rinka were both peering at my face, clearly worried sick. I, in contrast, just felt super happy and privileged to see the two of their faces first thing after I woke up.

"Honestly! Do you know how worried we were?!" said Yuna.

"Worried?" I repeated blankly.

"You fell off your swimming ring and nearly drowned, Yotsuba," said Rinka. "One of the lifeguards ended up carrying you over to the pool's sick bay."

"O-Oh, really? I'm sorry for causing so much trouble!" I said.

"Don't be! It's okay," said Yuna.

"And wait, were you two okay while I was out?! You didn't have any creepy guys try to pick you up or anything, did you?!" I asked.

"Ah," Rinka grunted awkwardly as Yuna shrugged.

Okay, that reaction means that something definitely happened!

"Ha ha! They might've had a pretty tough time, when you put it that way," said a new voice. I looked over to see someone who I assumed was the lifeguard that Yuna had mentioned: an athletic-looking woman wearing a jacket over a swimsuit. "You three are just adorable, you know that? There were

droves of people who offered to help you out, and of course they were all leering at the three of you...”

Pretty sure she was just being nice when she said “the three of you,” but the two of them are definitely super cute, true.

“But those two turned each and every one of them down in a flash! I was pretty impressed. You three certainly get on well, don’t you?”

“We do!” said Yuna, Rinka, and I in perfect unison. So perfect, in fact, that all of us burst out laughing a second later.

“Hah hah, no kidding! You remind me of myself when I was your age,” the lifeguard said, though in my book she still looked a little too young herself to be teasing us like that.



“Feel free to hang out in here until you feel better!”

With those words, the lifeguard went back to her duties and left us on our own. I felt a little bad for keeping her occupied for as long as we had, considering she was on the clock, but that wasn’t the thing I felt worst about at the moment by a long shot.

“I’m so sorry!” I shouted the moment she was gone. “We finally got the chance to go out together and I totally ruined it...”

“What? You didn’t ruin anything!” said Yuna.

“We should be the ones apologizing, if anything,” added Rinka. “I get the sense we really made you worry, didn’t we?”

“What? Of course you—”

“And speaking of,” Rinka continued as she reached out toward me and gently brushed her fingers across my face, just a little below my eyes. It was such an elegant motion, I found myself spellbound. “Eye bags.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t notice at first, but you have bags under your eyes today. You didn’t sleep well last night, did you?” Rinka asked. The way she was looking at me

almost felt like how a concerned mother would look at her children. Yuna was giving me the same sort of look, and I instantly realized that *I'd* really made the two of them worry about *me* this time.

"N-Nah, not at all! I got a whole ten hours of sleep last night, totally... I mean, y'know, ha ha ha," I said, lying reflexively to try and dodge the question, but the look in their eyes didn't change for a second. "...I'm sorry. You're right. I haven't gotten much sleep lately at all," I quickly admitted. Just like they'd figured out that I was fibbing, I'd figured out that they weren't going to let me change the subject that easily.

"Is something weighing on your mind?" asked Rinka.

"I mean, I guess, sorta... It's about a friend," I said.

If anything was weighing on my mind, it could only be the matter with Makina. I'd done my absolute best to switch gears and not obsess over it today, but no matter how hard I tried, her request and the face she'd made when she asked me just kept drifting back into my mind...

It was especially bad at night. I'd try to clear my mind and fall asleep, and just like that, I'd be thinking about her again. I wanted to do something to help her, I really did, and yet—*and yet*—I just kept spinning my wheels, running through the same sequence of thoughts again and again.

"A friend..." Rinka repeated, sounding a little taken aback by the word. It was a totally natural reaction. After all, she and Yuna were probably under the impression that I didn't *have* any close acquaintances other than the two of them. The only other people I could potentially call my friends at school would be Koganezaki and Emma, and I wasn't *quite* at a level where I could give either of them that label with complete confidence. There was absolutely no way they'd be aware of Makina, considering—

"Is that friend the person you got all dressed up to go see the day before yesterday?" asked Yuna.

"Uh?" I grunted.

For a second, I couldn't understand what she'd asked me. Then I gaped at her, and a moment later, her eyes widened and she slapped a hand to her mouth, as

if she couldn't believe what she'd just said.

"Ah! Sorry, I mean..."

"Why do you know about that, Yuna?" I asked.

Yuna took in a sharp breath, then awkwardly broke eye contact. I didn't know how it was possible that she could've found out. After all, the only people who knew about that were Makina, Sakura, and Aoi, so...*wait a minute.*

"Sakura told her. Didn't she, Yuna?"

"Gah! Rinkaaa," Yuna moaned.

"I heard too. From Aoi, in my case," Rinka continued.

"Seriously?!" I said.

"Seriously," said Rinka. "That's why I had a feeling that Yuna might've caught word about it in the same sort of way... Well, I only realized just a second ago, really," she added with a slight grin.

Come to think of it, Sakura and Aoi knew I didn't have a date planned on that day because they heard about it from these two, didn't they? I'd been convinced that the two of them had asked my girlfriends about our plans apropos of nothing, but it seemed I was wrong. In truth, they'd sprung the question *because* they'd seen me getting ready to go out, and had said as much. And, really, you'd *think* I'd have figured that out from the very beginning! It was really obvious! *Maybe I didn't realize because I didn't want them to know, and decided to assume it wasn't possible for the sake of my own convenience?*

"Sorry, Yotsuba," Rinka continued. "Don't blame your sisters for telling us, okay? I'm sure that they were just worried about you."

"N-No, you have it all wrong! I'm not *mad* at all!" I said. "I was just like, 'Oh, okay, that explains a lot,' that's all... It feels like *I* dragged you two into all this, so if anything, *I* should feel bad."

"Dragged us into...?" Yuna began, her expression dark, then stopped and shook her head. "No, never mind. It's okay, Yotsuba," she said, forcing herself to smile again. "The *real* point here is that if this friend of yours has you worried about something, I'd like it if you'd be willing to talk to us about it! We might be

able to help out somehow.”

“Yuna... Yeah, you’re right. Thank you,” I said.

Neither of them had accused me of anything. Instead, they’d kindly and patiently asked me to talk to them about it. How could the two of them be so *nice*? Especially considering they might very well have had plenty of questions and doubts that they could’ve been voicing instead!

“So, umm... Basically, an old friend of mine who went away when we were in kindergarten just moved back to my neighborhood,” I began.

“So...a childhood friend?” asked Yuna.

“You could say that, I guess,” I said. “The thing is, though, I’d honestly totally forgotten all about her... But apparently she remembered me, and she remembered some silly little promise we made to each other back then too...”

“A promise?” echoed Rinka.

“Ah! No, never mind about that! It doesn’t really have anything to do with this,” I said. It didn’t feel right to tell them about how Makina had gone and become a super-popular idol without asking her first. Plus, considering how bad at explaining stuff I was, I figured it’d just derail the conversation or make everything even more complicated if I tried. “But anyway, that friend has a problem that she’s dealing with. How to explain it...? Umm, she sorta has a stalker, or something like that.”

“A *stalker*?!” gasped Yuna.

“Isn’t that something that she should go to the police about...?” asked Rinka.

“Ah, umm, it’s really only *like* a stalker sort of deal! It’s not quite on that level, you could say? Gosh, this is so hard to explain... Honestly, I’m not sure I can make any of this make sense, but the point is that it’s not really a police-worthy sort of situation.”

I couldn’t exactly say that Makina was getting chased around by paparazzi from some weekly gossip rag without bringing up the fact that she was a celebrity, and when I tried to describe the situation *without* getting into those details, it ended up coming out way more muddled than I’d intended it to.

Celebrities really have it rough, huh?

“So anyway, the person who’s following her around is suspicious that she might be going out with this one guy,” I continued. “It’s not true at all, and the person who’s following her is causing her a lot of trouble, so she wants to resolve the misunderstanding. She can’t just *talk* to them about it, though, for a bunch of reasons...er, umm...is any of this making sense to you guys...?”

It felt like my story was falling to pieces before my very eyes, but Yuna and Rinka both nodded in confirmation. Apparently, we were still on the same page.

“So that’s why she asked me if I could pretend to be her girlfriend,” I concluded.

“...Huh?” Yuna and Rinka grunted in dumbfounded astonishment.

“How does *that* follow, like, at *all*?!” Yuna shouted.

“Hold on, Yotsuba,” said Rinka. “Did you *agree* to this?”

“N-No, I didn’t! I turned her down at first, of course!”

“‘At first’...?” Yuna repeated.

“Ah! Uh...” I stammered, then glanced away. She’d really zeroed in on the important part in an instant. “I, uh...put off giving her a final answer, I guess.”

I couldn’t look them in the eye. I was too scared. What if they were disappointed in me? What if they were *furious* with me...?

“That’s—that’s just—that’s so...!” Yuna began to shout, but segued into dejection before she could spit it out.

“Yuna...” Rinka said, sounding a little worried, then turned to me. “So, Yotsuba—if you’ve been worrying about your friend’s request, I’m guessing that means you’re planning on saying yes?”

I gasped. When she put it that way, I couldn’t really deny it. If I’d been planning on saying no to Makina, there wouldn’t have been any reason for me to agonize over it like this. I already had Yuna and Rinka. I already had two wonderful girlfriends...and yet...

“I want to help her,” I said. “She’s an old friend, and she’s been working really

hard in the time since we last saw each other...and she came to *me* of all people for help.”

It was only when I put it into words that I realized how I truly felt. I didn’t want to betray Yuna and Rinka, but I didn’t want to leave Makina high and dry either. Maybe this was greedy of me...but I didn’t want to give up on any of them.

“Yuna, Rinka, I’m sorry. I...” I began, then paused. It was totally possible that being this openly selfish would cause the two of them to give up on me. This might be the test that pushed their affection for me past its limits, and knowing that, I couldn’t bring myself to spit those next few words out. On the other hand, I’d already said enough that they’d probably already put the pieces together themselves...and in the end, I couldn’t bring myself to break the silence that I’d created, and couldn’t bring myself to run away either. I just stood there, head hung.

“Well...why not?” Yuna said nonchalantly.

“Huh?”

I looked up to find her smiling at me—the same smile she always wore.

“I was positive that you were going to spring something *way* crazier than that on us, honestly,” she added.

“Yuna... Yes, I see what you mean,” said Rinka. “This is all so, well...so just like Yotsuba, I can’t even bring myself to be surprised at this point, I suppose.”

“Huh? *Huh?*” Their reactions were so far from what I’d expected, they left me totally bewildered.

“You want to help this girl, right, Yotsuba? I don’t see why we’d be in any position to object to that,” said Yuna.

“I’m not going to pretend I’m *excited* about you acting like you’re in a relationship with her...but it’s not like you’ll actually be going out with her, right?” Rinka asked.

“R-Right,” I said.

“Then why not?” Yuna repeated. “I’m sure you must be worried sick, seeing

as she's an old friend and all. Right, Rinka?"

"True enough," Rinka agreed. "And if you decided *not* to help her on our account, I'm sure you'd end up regretting it."

Just like that, the two of them gave me the encouragement I needed. I was being selfish, and I knew it, but they still stood by my side.

"Thanks... Thank you so much, both of you," I said. That was all I could think to say, really.

"And on a totally different subject, are you feeling okay, Yotsuba?" asked Yuna.

"Ah! Umm," I stammered.

"You probably shouldn't push yourself for the rest of today," said Rinka. "It's just about lunchtime anyway, so how about we grab something quick to eat and head home?"

"Sorry," I sighed. "We finally got to go out together and I totally ruined—"

"Oh, stop apologizing!" Yuna said as she pressed a finger to my lips. "We'll have *plenty* of chances to go to the pool from now on. The ocean too! We'll always be together, so we don't have to worry about things like that."

"Yuna..."

"Unless you were under the impression this would be our last chance? That's a shock," said Rinka.

"Rinka... W-Wait, no, that's not what I meant!"

"Hah hah! I know, I know. And anyway, this was a good experience. Now we know never to tease you while you're riding a swimming float, for one thing," Rinka said with a wink.

"Ugh... Come *on*, you two!"

"Hee hee hee!" Yuna giggled.

I don't know what it was that made that jab so embarrassing, but I felt my face start to burn up as I frantically tried to defend myself.

Interlude II: Rinka Aiba

“Yuna?”

“...”

“Yuna, I’m talking to you.”

“Ah! Huh? Rinka...?”

“Come on, really...?”

Yuna had been acting like this ever since we left the pool and said goodbye to Yotsuba. She was so spacey and absentminded that I could prompt her over and over without ever getting anything more than a vague grunt in response. She probably would’ve stayed standing at the station for ages if I hadn’t pulled her home by the arm.

“We’re back. See? Our houses are right there,” I said.

“Mnhh...”

I sighed. “Well, I certainly can’t leave you on your own while you’re like *this*. Want to come inside?”

“Mnhh...”

She’d completely shut down—or at least switched to a totally unresponsive input source—and I couldn’t disguise my exasperation as I dragged her into my house and brought her upstairs to my room.

Yuna was my childhood friend, and we’d been together for as long as I could remember. This might be bias talking, considering our relationship, but I’d always thought of her as a friendly, sociable person. The worst thing I could say about her was that she was a pretty talented liar. She certainly put me to shame when it came to social skills, and she could be quite bold when she had to be as well. It had been her idea to feign the relationship that ended up getting the two of us called the Sacrosanct, for one thing!

In that sense, I had a feeling that Yuna was probably much more mature than

I was. The thing is, I was also painfully aware that her mature side was by no means all there was to her. Her present state was very clear proof of that.

Yuna sighed deeply as she stepped into my room, tottered over to my bed, and collapsed into it, completely ignoring me all the while. She hadn't lain down to go to sleep, though. Instead, she started rolling around, moaning and groaning all the while.

Well, there she goes. Her worst habit rears its head again.

Yuna was as mature as a girl could be...or so everyone around her believed. In truth, when she got into one of her childish moods, she could be downright infantile. Every once in a while, her feelings would get the better of her and she'd lose all sense of self-control. She was very careful to keep that side of her bottled up, though. She didn't even let her family see her like this, when at all possible. It was only when she found herself in my room that she could let herself turn off her sense of self-restraint entirely. She'd gotten into this state for all sorts of reasons over the course of the years...but recently, every single time it had happened, it was always about *her*.

Yotsuba. The girl who Yuna and I were both dating. Society at large would say that she was two-timing us, but all three of us were aware of what was going on and had granted each other our consent to keep our relationships as they were.

I was satisfied with that arrangement, of course. It let me go out with the girl I loved, so what was there to complain about? My feelings for Yotsuba really were just that strong, and she loved me back just as deeply. The fact that she loved two people didn't mean that each of us got half the affection—that's just not how it worked with her. She had the sheer sincerity to give each of us a hundred percent of her love, if not more, and that was one of the things that made me love her more than I could express. Plus...the fact that things had turned out this way meant that I could stay best friends with Yuna.

If we'd ended up in a situation where Yotsuba could only go out with one of us, I'm confident that neither I nor Yuna would've chosen to back down. We would've fought over her with everything we had, and probably would've ended up unable to so much as talk with each other properly until the matter was settled. Finally, when everything was over and one of us had been chosen,

the one left on her own probably wouldn't have been able to bring herself to be around the one who was chosen anymore.

I'm really getting sidetracked, though, aren't I? This wasn't the time to be thinking about what might have been. I had to figure out how to get Yuna out of her current mood before anything else. Fortunately, I had a pretty good idea about what had set her off. Most likely, she was in this state for the same reason that *I* was feeling a nagging, stinging pain in my own heart.

"Yuna."

"Ugggh..."

"If you're that upset about it, you should've just told her to say no."

"Then why didn't *you* tell her that?"

"Well...because I couldn't."

The two of us sighed, loudly, in unison.

"I didn't *lie* to her, okay?" said Yuna.

"Neither did I...but, well..."

That stabbing pain was growing more and more pronounced by the minute. I knew that feeling well: anxiety.

When I was in middle school, I ended up getting asked to help out the athletic clubs quite frequently. They'd ask me to join in on their practice sessions, and play in practice matches with other schools as well. I turned them down when they asked me to play in official matches, of course, but being called in as their secret weapon still put a lot of pressure on me, even if it *was* only for the sake of practice. Back in the day, when I was under the impression that I was just a little better at sports than most other girls, I always felt anxious about whether or not I'd be able to live up to their expectations...and that feeling prompted a pain very similar to the one I was feeling now. That's all it was, though—just *similar*. The pain I felt now was far, *far* harsher and sharper than what I'd felt back then, to the point that it almost felt wrong to compare them.

"I really don't like this, honestly. Even if it is just an act, I don't like the idea of Yotsuba going around like she's somebody else's girlfriend," I said.

I was shocked by how feeble my words came out sounding...but Yuna didn't tease me at all this time. She slowly sat up and turned to me, the look on her face telling me that she might burst into tears at any second. I wasn't surprised to see her looking that way. After all, I had a pretty clear idea that I was making a very similar sort of expression.

"You too, Rinka...?" she said. "I mean, of course you wouldn't, I guess."

"Right? I feel the same way you do, after all." I loved Yotsuba just as much as Yuna did...and I was just as much of a coward too.

Back when I first found out that Yuna was in love with Yotsuba too, I'd felt like my life had come to an end. I'd been by her side for my whole life, after all. I'd probably spent more time with her than I had with my own family. Even if she did have her childish side, I still saw Yuna as being more or less the perfect girl. She was cuter than anyone else I'd ever met, and she knew how to show her charms off to perfect effect as well. She was a fabulous student and an incredibly quick thinker. I'd wished that I could be like her more times than I could count. And...I'd thought that Yotsuba would see her in the same way.

If it came down to a choice between me and Yuna, I was convinced that Yotsuba would pick her in the end. And yet...



"Rinka, I...I asked Yotsuba out."

"You...huh?"

It was an evening I would never forget. Yuna had shown up at my house without warning, barged into my room, and was now sitting across from me with the most awkward expression I'd ever seen her make.

"I'm sorry! I know this is coming out of nowhere," she said. "But I just couldn't hold it back anymore, and it just...happened..."

I didn't say a word. I just stood there, dumbfounded. I'd been holding my phone, and set it down in a daze, when suddenly—

Bvvt! Bvvt!

"Huh?" Yuna grunted.

“Ah! Sorry!” I yelped. Her phone had started vibrating, on account of the fact that I’d been so out of it, I’d accidentally hit the call button on *mine* as I put it down.

“Uhh. Rinka?” Yuna questioned as she glanced at her phone and saw who was calling.

“I was just about to call you when you walked in, actually,” I explained as I frantically hung up my phone, then paused to take a deep breath. Our conversation had only just started and I could already feel a bead of cold sweat dripping its way down my back. “The thing is...I asked her out too. Earlier today.”

“*Huh?!*” Yuna gasped. This time it was her turn to be shocked. Somehow, without consulting with each other in any capacity, the two of us had managed to ask out the same girl on the exact same day. “Oh, wow,” Yuna muttered. “You too, huh...?”

“Yeah,” I replied.

It was an incredibly awkward moment. Probably the most awkward moment in the whole history of our relationship. It was a hundred times more uncomfortable than the moment we’d realized we were both in love with Yotsuba, and what felt like minutes ticked by in a silence that neither of us could bring ourselves to break.

“Wait a second,” Yuna finally said.

“Hm?”

“You asked her out today, you said? So, like, *after* I did, then?”

“I...suppose so, yeah. I met up with her after you did, so it stands to reason.” That hadn’t occurred to me until Yuna pointed it out. If Yuna had asked her out today as well, then that meant she would’ve had to have done so *before* I met up with Yotsuba and asked her out myself. *That’s strange, though. After all, Yuna doesn’t look, well...*

“But you don’t look like you’re *sad* or anything,” Yuna muttered.

I was pretty sure she was talking to herself, but her words reflected the exact

question that I was preoccupied with as well. The way Yuna was acting didn't make it look like she'd been *turned down* at all. For that matter, I couldn't imagine her getting turned down in the first place. It just wouldn't make sense.

But, wait. What does that mean...?

Yotsuba had agreed to go out with me. In other words, Yotsuba and I were in a relationship now.

"Hmm...?" Yuna and I both hummed, cocking our heads in unison. There was only one answer that made sense, and it had come to mind in an instant. It was just so *wildly* audacious, though—too far beyond the realm of common sense—that I was having trouble believing that Yotsuba could've really chosen to run with it.

Actually, though...knowing her, it's totally possible. Yotsuba does have a way of defying expectations... And, I mean, I love that about her, but still. She was a genuinely strange girl, and I'd never been able to predict what she might do next. *But would she really...?*

"Hey, Yuna," I said. "So, you asked her out...and then what? Did she say yes?"

In truth, I knew the answer before I even asked. Still, though, I couldn't just leave it unsaid.

"She did, yeah," said Yuna. "You too?"

I hesitated for a moment as a wave of giddy dizziness washed over me, then nodded. "Yeah."

This is...wow. What even is this? Weirdly enough, I felt the urge to laugh more than anything else.

"So, let me get this straight," said Yuna. "Yotsuba's dating *both of us*, right?"

"Right. So...she's two-timing us?" I replied. I think that was probably the first time in my life I'd used those words in a real sort of context. The thought that I'd ever have someone cheat on me with Yuna, or vice versa, had never so much as crossed my mind until that moment. And yet...

"But you know, that doesn't actually sound that bad," I said.

Yuna gasped. "You think so too?!" she shouted as she leapt to her feet.

“Gah! Y-Yuna?!”

“It *doesn't*, does it?!” she carried on, leaning in so close I almost fell over backward. “I was thinking the exact same thing! But why, though?! Isn't getting two-timed supposed to, like, piss you off or something?! When somebody cheats on you, it's supposed to tear your self-esteem to pieces and junk! But, like...”

All that momentum that Yuna's speech had built up vanished in a flash as she visibly wilted. Before I knew it, she'd put on a face she tried never to show anyone other than me: the face of a frail, scared girl.

“I'm just...I'm just so glad I don't have to fight over her with you,” Yuna finally concluded.

“Yuna...”

“I kept thinking about how who asked her out first doesn't really matter at all. I got the jump on it, sure, but, like, if you ever felt like it, I figured you could just come in and sweep her away...y'know?”

“Yeah...I know exactly what you mean,” I said.

Since the moment we'd learned that we both loved Yotsuba, we'd become more than just longtime best friends. We'd become rivals in love, and we both knew it. Both of us wanted Yotsuba. Each of us loved her just as much as the other. And if I hadn't asked her out today, and Yuna had come over to tell me that she *had*...I'm positive I would've decided not to give up on her. As to what would've happened after that...I don't even want to think about it, honestly. I couldn't stand even considering it, and I'm sure that Yuna couldn't either. That's why we'd kept our feelings hidden away for so long. I never expected that we'd both slip up and lose control on the same day, of course.

“Getting two-timed, huh...?” I muttered. “It's weird, but somehow, I'm starting to feel like this is the best possible solution for all of us.”

“Hard same,” said Yuna. “Like, just think about it! This means that *both* of us get to have Yotsuba as our girlfriend, right?”

“You don't want to have her all to yourself, then?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t say *no*...but this is a billion times better than us having to fight over her.”

I couldn’t have agreed more, and it didn’t feel like we were making a compromise. I genuinely felt that this was the best possible outcome.

“Course, for the record, I totally love Yotsuba the most,” said Yuna.

“Well, I can’t let *that* go by unchallenged,” I said. “I love her more than you do, thank you very much!”

“Say what?!”

“You heard me!”

After everything we’d been through that day, *this* was what caused sparks to finally start flying between us. Before I knew it, we were staring each other down. The two-timing we could live with, but admitting that there was a chance we didn’t love Yotsuba the most? *That* was off the table. Yuna wasn’t even my only competition, in my mind. I wanted to fall even harder for Yotsuba—so hard that I could say I loved her more than even her parents, even the little sisters she doted upon...and I wanted her to fall for me just as hard. I think everyone has a desire or two like that, and I was no exception, no matter who was two-timing who.

And so Yuna and I growled as we glared daggers at each other, neither of us willing to budge an inch. In the end, we’d spend all night arguing back and forth over which of us understood Yotsuba the best.



It’s kind of crazy, looking back on it... When I thought back to the events of that day, though, I still firmly believed we’d made the right decision. Yotsuba had chosen both of us, and we’d chosen to accept it.

That being said...in a certain sense, I had to admit that in doing so, we were also running away. It never felt like either of us had firmly won Yotsuba’s heart with our own power. However it had felt at the time, our relationship *was* founded upon compromise, and that foundation didn’t prompt confidence in me. No, it prompted anxiety.

What if Yotsuba falls for somebody else someday...?

When I'd learned that Yotsuba's little sisters loved her in, you know, *that way*, I have to admit I felt really shaken. They *were* her actual, biological sisters, to be fair, and Yotsuba never seemed interested in having that sort of relationship with them at all. Actually, she acted so casually about the whole thing that part of me had to question whether she *really* even understood how they felt about her. I almost felt sorry for her sisters, in the end...but the point is, there was no guarantee that things would play out in the same way this time.

"A childhood friend, huh?" I sighed.

"I seriously had *no clue* she had one of those!" said Yuna. "I thought *we* were supposed to be her first-ever friends?"

"So did I, but, well...you know how she can be," I said.

"Well, she *does* tend to be wildly irresponsible—*ahem*, she does tend to go a little further than she should in all sorts of ways."

Yotsuba would misremember things and blow things out of proportion all the time. I suppose you could say that she was remarkably free-spirited, in that sense. It was like she couldn't be tied down by her past in the least. It was almost shocking how *not* shocking the idea that she could've forgotten a childhood friend or two was...but speaking of shocks, this situation was one, and there was no mistaking it. She had a childhood friend—in other words, she had someone who was to her like Yuna was to me.

"You know something, Rinka?" said Yuna. "People tend to make all sorts of weird, nasty assumptions about childhood friends."

"How could I *not* know that? I've had people making that sort of assumption about me all my life," I said.

Those assumptions, in fact, were the whole reason why Yuna had been able to build up the feigned relationship that turned the two of us into the Sacrosanct. We'd both stood out in our own distinctive ways from the beginning, sure, but the incredibly deep bond we shared, brought about by knowing each other for as long as we could remember, played a far more important role. And now Yotsuba had somebody like that too, and that

somebody had asked Yotsuba to pretend to be her girlfriend, to boot. We'd only known Yotsuba for a little over a year, but *she* was different, and *she* didn't have a sibling relationship to overcome before she could get her hands on our girlfriend. She was someone special.

"It'll be all right."

"Yuna?"

"It will... I'm sure it will," Yuna repeated.

No matter how I looked at the situation, I couldn't describe it as "all right" in the least. And yet...

"Yeah...you're right. It'll be all right for sure."

I echoed Yuna's reassurance. I said it again, and again, hoping each time that it would ease the crushing pressure in my breast. Still, though, the hands that I'd clenched without even realizing it stayed firmly shut, and showed no sign of budging an inch.

Chapter 3: An Aquarium “Date” to Remember

A few days had passed since my date with Yuna and Rinka. I’d once again endured the suspicious gazes of my little sisters as I got myself dressed up and fled the house, arriving at Makina’s place at precisely the time we’d agreed to meet.

“Okay, right on time! Let’s do this!” I said, hyping myself up, then rang her doorbell. I heard the chime ring through her door, and waited for Makina to open up...for what turned out to be several minutes.

“S-Sorry for the wait!” Makina shouted as she finally flung the door open.

“Morning, Makina,” I said.

“G-Good morning, Yotsy,” said Makina. She seemed really fidgety and nervous, and it made her look super innocent in an adorable sort of way.

“Would you like to come in for a minute? Sorry—I’m not quite ready to go yet,” she continued.

“Oh! Am I early?” I asked.

“Oh, no! I just ended up spending ages worrying about what I should wear... Anyway, it’s too hot to stand around outside! Come in!” Makina said as she waved me inside.

I stepped into her house, which once again seemed to be totally abandoned, Makina aside. As I entered the living room, though, I gasped.

“Oh, wow! That’s a lot of outfits!” I exclaimed. There were clothes scattered all across the room. Makina had clearly not been kidding about her indecision.

“I’ve been having such a hard time deciding, it’s like I’m lost in a fashion maze,” Makina commented dryly.

“I’m surprised! You seem like you’d know all about fashion, so I thought you’d be able to pick out an outfit in a flash!”

“Oh, not even a little! I mean, yeah, I have to wear all sorts of outfits for my

work, but my stylist picks out pretty much all of those. All I do is put them on. I barely know anything at all about coordinating an outfit myself,” Makina bashfully admitted.

Her current outfit, by the way, was the same set of casual loungewear she’d been wearing the last time I visited her place, and she still looked ridiculously good in it. A girl as cute as her could make anything look good, really. I, on the other hand, was wearing a white button-down shirt, a pair of green chinos, and a pair of black sneakers: an outfit as normal as outfits could get...but, like, I *had* thought it through and stuff before I went out in this! I thought about what sorta clothes would be appropriate for our destination, researched the latest fashions, and spent ages deciding what sort of look would suit me best! I may have been an awkward, gloomeriffic former loner, but I was *growing*, dangit!

All that being said, I was starting to wish that I’d thought my choice of clothing through just a liiittle bit more thoroughly. I was, after all, going out with *Makina*. Hiatus or not, she was still a mega-popular idol, and the thought of walking around beside her was, well...kinda scary, honestly.

Just then, Makina spoke up again. “I love how your outfit today is so *you*, Yotsy,” she said.

“Uh... Was that a compliment?” I asked.

Makina cocked her head. “Um, yes?”

No, no, stop that! I’d almost gone and let my spinelessness get the better of me again, instantly reading negativity into every comment that had anything to do with me.

“And if you’ve got that sort of look going on today...okay, I’ve decided! Wait up just a minute!” Makina continued, then grabbed a set of clothes and vanished into the next room over.

I watched her go, then took a seat to wait on her couch. Makina’s living room looked pretty much exactly like it had the last time I’d visited. I couldn’t pick out any new items or decorations, and it still had that same simple, frugal vibe. It really drove in the fact that she was the only person living here.

I wonder if she gets lonely or anything? She’d said something about wanting

some time to herself, but I had to wonder if she'd change her mind about that once she learned what it was like *always* being on her own. *But I guess bringing that up would make me a real busybody, huh?*

I'd spent more time than I'd ever wanted to on my own, so imagining Makina sitting here in this big house, eating her meals in solitude, made me feel a clenching pressure in my chest. It was all the worse when I considered the fact that even at my worst moments, I always had my mom, my dad, Sakura, and Aoi there for me as soon as I went home. I could be happy to have been born as myself because my family was there for me. If Makina didn't have that, though... If she hadn't had anyone who could be there for her when she felt like she couldn't go on anymore...

"Yotsy?"

"Gah!" I yelped, whipping around at the sound of Makina's voice.

"Hee hee! Thanks for waiting!"

"Ah..." I grunted, suddenly at a loss for words.

The girl standing before me could only be described as Maki Amagi, idol extraordinaire. There was no mistaking her. She was wearing a simple, snow-white dress that looked so perfect on her, I had to do a triple take to convince myself it wasn't a wedding dress. She looked pure, and clean, and unsullied...really, any of the words in my (admittedly less than great) mental lexicon that fit that general image could've applied to her perfectly.

"What do you think?" Makina asked. "Is it a little too plain?"

"Huh...?" I muttered in disbelief. "A-Are you kidding?! It's not plain at *all*! You're straight up *shining* over there! How could that be *plain*?!"

"Y-You're exaggerating," said Makina in a display of remarkable humility. Then she seemed to remember something, pulled out her phone, and showed it to me. "So, umm, I ran a search, and I learned that apparently it's good to wear bright clothing if you're planning on going somewhere dark!"

"Oh, hey, I found that site too!" I exclaimed. "It said that wearing dark clothes in a dark place makes you look older than you really are!"

“Hee hee! Oh, so *that’s* why you wore a white shirt today!” Makina said with a delighted grin. “I picked out this outfit after I saw yours, really! I figured it’d be nice to look like we subtly match each other, you know?”

“O-Oh, I get it!”

If I were being honest, I’d have to say that, given how much higher of a baseline she was working with, clothes would never be enough to make the two of us *match* in any real sense of the word. Makina looked like the prim and proper daughter of a well-to-do family, while I looked like...I dunno, some random village boy? If the two of us walked around like this, I figured we’d look like a little lady out on a secret date with her peasant paramour. *Of course, this is supposed to be a date, so maybe that’s exactly the image we should be going for?*

“Now I just have to put this on, and wear these, and...done!” said Makina as she put on a big, adorable hat and a pair of fake glasses. “How do I look?”

“S-Super cute!” I gasped.

“N-Not like *that!*” said Makina. “I mean, umm...it’s supposed to be a *disguise*, you know...?”

“Ah! I get it now!” I’d just thought that she was being a little extra fancy at first, but when she put it that way, her ensemble *did* sorta fit the image of a celebrity in disguise to go on a secret date. Our goal was for the gossip rag that was after her to take some pictures and run an article about her supposed relationship with me, and that outfit felt like it’d sell the story pretty well. Not that I had *any* clue whether it would actually be an even remotely effective disguise, in the end!

“Hee hee! Gotcha, Yotsy!” said Makina with an innocent grin as she grabbed onto my arm. She smelled so nice, I found myself instantly dazed. “We’ll definitely look like we’re dating if we walk around like this, right?”

“I-I guess some people might see it that way...?” I stammered.

“Do you think we should go a little further with it, then?”

“N-Nah, it’s fine! Trying *too* hard might just make it seem less convincing, you know?” I quickly muttered, doing my best to change the subject. Even as I did

so, though, I felt my inferiority complex creeping back up on me. *I mean, seriously—if we weren't childhood friends, there's literally no way we'd have ever crossed paths with each other, is there?*

“Ah, sorry, Yotsy!” said Makina. “I took ages getting ready, and now we have to hurry or we’ll miss the bus.”

“Ah...right. Yeah, let’s get going,” I replied with a nod. It was time for me to shove my negativity to the side. I mean, okay, it’s not *really* negativity if it’s true—me thinking along those lines was probably closer to realism, even—but the point is that I had to focus on the date before me. Rinka and Yuna had indulged my selfish desire, and Makina had been ready and willing to accommodate my condition for accepting her request. For all of their sakes, I had to do my absolute best today! I was set on it!



Let’s turn the clock back to yesterday for just a moment.

“One day? That’s all...?” asked Makina.

“Yeah,” I said after a moment of hesitation.

I’d brooded and brooded over the question of her request ever since my pool date with Yuna and Rinka, and I’d just given her the answer that I’d reached. We were talking over the phone, so I couldn’t see her expression, but I could tell from her tone alone that she was shocked. Shocked, and maybe a little disappointed as well.

“I want to help you,” I said. “I really do, honestly! But there are people who’ll be worried if I keep it up for too long, and I don’t want that...”

“I understand,” said Makina.

“S-Sorry.”

“No, it’s only natural. Plus, *I’m* the one who asked you for a crazy favor in the first place.”

I couldn’t help but feel that the condition I’d set was selfish of me, but Makina accepted it and laughed it off right away. She’d asked me to pretend to go out with her in order to make the gossip-rag paparazzi stop following her around so

incessantly, and I wanted to make that happen for her, but I also didn't want to cheat on my girlfriends...so I'd come up with a compromise: I'd asked her if she'd be all right with having our arrangement last for just one day—a single date. We might have to think things through again if that one time wasn't enough to bring the matter to a close, of course, but we'd cross that bridge if we got there.

“In that case, there's no time like the present! Would tomorrow work for you?” asked Makina.

“Huh?! Tomorrow?!” I yelped.

“Yeah! Ah... Unless you already have plans or something?”

“N-No, I don't! I'm totally free! It's just kinda sudden, and I was surprised, that's all... So, umm, does tomorrow work for you?”

“I'm the one who suggested it, so of course it does! I've actually had more spare time on my hands than I know what to do with lately, since I don't have to deal with my work obligations and all,” Makina said with a sort of embarrassed chuckle.

Wait, how's that something to be embarrassed about?! We were the same age, and she was already earning her own money! That was downright crazy! She'd debuted as a pro in middle school, and climbed the ranks of stardom in a flash! Man, she really is...

“You really are amazing, Makina...”

“Yotsy?”

“Ah... Sorry, never mind!” I backpedaled. It wasn't like I thought there was something *bad* about calling her amazing. The problem was that it wasn't a genuine compliment. It was my inferiority complex talking, and that fact was obvious enough that even *I* could hear it in my own tone, so I shut down that topic on the spot, settled on a time for the two of us to meet up, and then hung up before she could stop to question it.

I sighed. Talking with Makina on the phone had made me nervous in a totally different sort of way than talking with Yuna and Rinka did. That said, my nerves were coming from the same place in all three cases: I just didn't want them to

think that I was a weirdo.

“Man, though...Maki Amagi? Really?” I muttered to myself. I absentmindedly ran a search for her name on my phone, and realized that a ton of her music was available on a streaming service that I was subscribed to. “Oh, wow, there’s so many of them...and they’re all crazy high up in the rankings!”

The comment sections on all of her songs were full of people reacting to her hiatus. They were talking about how it had reminded them that her music really *was* just that good, or talking about how sad they were that she’d be gone from the business. *Everyone on here really loves Makina, huh? Er, I mean, they really love Maki Amagi.*

I sprawled out on my bed and played her top-ranked song of the day. *Ah, I’ve heard this one*, I thought as its first few notes rang out. It was a song that had become sort of representative of her idol group, Shooting Star, and news programs always seemed to play it whenever there was a story about them. It was a real earworm, and the five members of the group sang it in such perfect harmony that most people would fall for their music in an instant after hearing it. In spite of that harmony, though, one of their voices stood out above the rest.

Oh, wow—Makina’s really, really good! She didn’t throw off the group’s sense of unity at all, but somehow, she still managed to stand head and shoulders above the other members. I was a total amateur when it came to music, of course, and biased to boot, but considering she stood out so much to me on the basis of her voice alone, I could only imagine how she’d shine up on the stage. I hear people say things like “if I get reborn, I wanna be like that one celebrity” pretty often, but in Maki Amagi’s case, it always seemed like people phrased it as “even if I get reborn, I could never possibly be like her.” I *really* sympathized with that.

“I bet I would’ve gotten super into her music if I weren’t so bitter,” I sighed to myself. I’d only listened to one of her songs, and part of me was already a fan. I let it keep playing into the next song, and my instant reaction was, “Oh, I like this one too.” I went on to listen to all of her group members’ solo songs too, repeating my favorites over and over so many times I was humming along with them before I knew it.

“Wait—*huh*?! Why’s the sun coming up already?!”

And, before I knew it, I’d whiled the whole night away without getting so much as a wink of sleep!!!

“O-Oh, crap! I have a *date* today! N-No, wait, it’s not too late! I can still get a little sleep if I just go to bed right now,” I frantically muttered. I glanced at my clock and found that it had only just turned five in the morning. We were scheduled to meet up at ten, and I’d be picking Makina up from her house, so I only had to budget in a single minute or so for the commute. I would’ve *liked* to have more time to get ready at my own pace, of course, but time was in short supply!

If I give myself one hour to get going...I can still sleep till nine! That’s four hours of rest! I snagged my phone again and sent a message to my family’s group chat.

Me: I accidentally stayed up all night! Going to bed now! Make your own breakfast&lunch kthx!!!

I’d abandoned my household chores—truly, a miserable dereliction of responsibility—but sometimes you have to make a sacrifice for the greater good! I’d be the *worst* if I didn’t put any effort into our date after negotiating for it to be a onetime affair! I knew that I’d be able to make it up to my family in the long run too...*so for now, my job’s to sleep like I’ve never slept before!*

“Good niight!”

...So, yeah. Turns out getting hyped up to sleep’s kinda counterproductive, and in the end, it took me well over an hour to actually lapse into unconsciousness.



“...tsy? Yotsy?”

Huh...? Gah! “Makina! Was I asleep just now?!” I yelped.

“Nope,” said Makina. “You *did* look like you were spacing out a little, though.”
That was close! Another moment or two, and I would’ve been off to

dreamland! Uhh, okay, lemme get this straight. I went to Makina's house, waited for her to get ready, then we headed out together, and—oh, right! That's it! We're walking to the station!

"Are you sleep-deprived?" Makina asked.

"Huh? Uh...yeah, a little," I admitted. I'd considered trying to play it off for a second, but decided I'd be better off being honest.

"If you're not feeling well, we could always reschedule...?" Makina suggested.

"No, it's okay! I'm fine!" I quickly replied. I was grateful for her consideration, but that was a kindness I just couldn't accept. I'd seen how much she'd been fretting over her preparations for our date, after all. I knew exactly how seriously she'd thought today through, so there was no way I could just say, "Yeah, sure, some other time," and leave! *Not to mention...* "The truth is, I was listening to you and your group's music last night."

"You were?"

I told Makina all about that streaming service I used and how I'd found her music on it.

"Ah..." Makina said. She pretty clearly knew exactly what I was talking about, and flashed me a slightly awkward smile. "It's a little embarrassing to think that you've been listening to those, I guess."

"What, really? You're embarrassed *now*? I thought thousands—no, hundreds of thousands—no, millions—no, *hundreds* of millions of people were already listening to your music all the time!" I countered.

"I'm pretty sure you're blowing this a little out of proportion...but, well," Makina began, then smiled and timidly took my hand in hers. "You know what? Right now, I'm actually happy to know that you've been listening to my music, Yotsy."

"Ah," I grunted as Makina gave my hand a squeeze, her fingers slipping between mine, and leaned in for some reason. "M-Makina...?"

Her features were far more delicate and beautiful up close than they'd ever seemed on TV. I was so captivated and so petrified that I literally forgot to

breathe. *N-No way...is she gonna k-kiss me?! But the date's only just started! We haven't even made it to the station yet! And more importantly, we're just pretending to date in the first place! Doesn't kissing feel like a step or ten too far?!*

My little freak-out, of course, stayed purely internal on account of the fact that I couldn't move an inch. Meanwhile, Makina leaned in closer and closer...right *past* my lips, until her mouth was right next to my ear?

"I love you and your everything," she whispered in a melodic, singsong sort of voice, her breath tickling my ear.

"Oh?!" I gasped. I recognized the tune at once. It was one of the songs I'd listened to the night before—specifically, her solo debut.

"Hee hee! What do you think?" Makina giggled. "This might sound a little stuck-up of me, but it's pretty rare for anyone to hear me sing to them live, without a mic or anything."

"O-Oh, jeez, that surprised me," I replied. My heart was hammering away in my chest. The nervous half-expectation had gotten it racing, and now the effect of Makina's singing had it maintaining that rapid pace out of pure excitement.

"I always wanted to sing this to you," she continued. "After all, I wrote that song just for you, Yotsy."

"Oh? Wait... *Huuuuuuuh?!"*

The title of Maki Amagi's very first single was "To My Beloved," and it was a pure, one hundred percent unambiguous love song. Its lyrics were passionate and deeply sentimental, describing the singer's love in powerful, undisguised terms. It had even managed to put *me* in a state of hyperemotional excitement the first time I heard it! And now Makina was saying she wrote it *for me*?!

"Wait a second! Makina, does that mean you, like...?" O-Oh god, what should I do?! I thought this whole deal was supposed to be a convenient lie to throw the press off her trail?! Don't tell me she actually has feelings for me?!

"Hee hee! Gotcha!" Makina giggled.

"You...bwuh?"

“You should’ve seen your face, Yotsy! The way your expression can change in the blink of an eye’s downright adorable!”

I don’t think you have any right to talk about rapid-fire expression swapping, actually! She’d looked *incredibly* sincere—almost tear-choked, even—just a second ago, but now she was grinning so brightly, I almost had to wonder if I’d been seeing things.

Wait... “Ah! Was *all* of that just you teasing me?!”

“Hmm—I wonder?”

“Oh, come *on*, Makina! You’re gonna give me a heart attack!”

“Hee hee hee! Sorry, Yotsy!” Makina said, then stuck out her tongue mischievously and pulled me forward by the hand.

So it was just a joke, I thought with relief. Still, though, each and every little thing she did had a way of setting my heart aflutter. She really was an idol, through and through. I’d heard about people who get so hardcore into their favorite idol that they blow all of their money to support them, and I had to admit, a part of me understood where that obsessive irresponsibility came from.

If I wasn’t already in a relationship, she would’ve had me in her clutches in a second... Though actually, I’ve heard that some people with significant others, or even spouses, still have a favorite idol that they follow as closely as possible! Maybe it wouldn’t be an issue for me to like her in that sort of way...?

As I was wracked by yet another internal conflict, Makina strolled along ahead of me, humming happily. I had no idea whether or not she knew what was going through my head in that moment. *Please, god, grant me this one request: let my sweat glands chill out and my palms stay dry for the rest of the day!*



We made our way to the local station, boarded a train, and rode along for around thirty minutes. Our destination would’ve been another thirty minutes on foot away from the station we got off at, and let me tell you: walking for a half hour in the blazing summer heat is a great way to end up sopping with sweat, and an *awful* way to start off a date! Being the young women we were,

Makina and I were pretty sensitive about that sort of thing, and that was one of many reasons why we'd decided to pay a little extra to take a shuttle bus from the station to the aquarium. We'd looked the bus schedule up in advance, and timed the trip so we got to the station right on time to hop a bus and arrive at our destination ten minutes later, just according to plan!

"We're here!" I shouted with excitement. It had been a solid decade since I'd been to this aquarium, personally.

"Oh, wow," said Makina. "It looks nothing like how I remember it! The whole outside's so much cleaner than it used to be."

"Right? I was surprised too!" I said.

Makina and I had come to this aquarium together once before, a long time ago. It was called the Ocean's Woodland Aquarium, and it was the closest one to the area we lived in. Even though it was right nearby, though, I hadn't been here even once between when we were in kindergarten and when we arrived for today's date.

"Was this really the best place for this, though?" I asked. "It's been just as long since the last time I came here as it has for you, so I'm not gonna be able to show you around or anything..."

"That's the best part!" Makina exclaimed. "We went here when we were kids, and now that we're adults...well, okay, maybe we're not *quite* adults yet, but the point is we get to rediscover it together! I couldn't ask for a better place!"

"Oh, wow," I murmured, taken aback. She was just so, I dunno...so put-together, I guess! Maybe *spirited*'s the right word? In any case, it was no wonder she'd climbed to the top of the celebrity world! *Sure, I had to look her up to figure that out, but still!*

"A-Anyway, that's enough standing around and chatting! Let's get in line!" Makina said, sounding a little bashful as she changed the subject and pulled me along by the hand.

I glanced around as we waited. There were a number of other groups lined up with us—mostly families and couples, from what I could tell. I'd thought the place would be abandoned on a weekday afternoon like this, but I hadn't been

considering the fact that it was summer break.

“Ah,” I said, “look! It says you can buy your tickets digitally on your phone! I guess it’s one of those things where it gives you a QR code and you can just scan yourself in.”

“Oh, huh,” said Makina. “But, well, if you’re all right with it, I’d prefer to wait in line and buy them the normal way. Something about digital tickets just feels lacking to me.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense, I guess. After all, getting a real ticket means you can keep it as a memento!” I said.

We kept chatting away, and before I knew it, we’d reached the front of the line. It seemed the line hadn’t been all that bad in the first place, and I was glad in retrospect that I hadn’t run straight to my phone just to save the tiniest bit of time.

“I’m a little surprised, though,” I said.

“About what?” asked Makina.

“I sort of pictured you as being, like, super efficient about everything, I guess,” I explained.

“Hee hee—you weren’t totally wrong! When things got particularly busy, I had to take great care to make sure my schedule was put together as efficiently as possible,” said Makina.

Oh, wow! She’s so cool and mature and stuff! I, on the other hand, was the sort of person who would regularly accidentally spend all day bumming about and not even realize it until the sun started setting.

“Psych,” Makina said a moment later. “The truth is, my manager was always in charge of putting together my schedule! I basically just let myself get dragged around from place to place, that’s all.”

“Oh, huh,” I grunted.

“Plus,” she continued, then paused for just a moment. “I like to spend as much time as possible on the things that are really important to me. You know how you mentioned having mementos a little while ago? It’s sort of the same

thing.” Makina waved her newly purchased ticket in the air with a smile. “I’m going to treasure this for a long time, trust me! It’s proof that I got to go out with you, even if it *was* just for a single day!”

“Bugwah!” H-Holy moly, she’s so cute! Not to mention flirty! But cute too! Flirty-cute as all get-out! Is she trying to make me fall for her?! ‘Cause at this rate, it might just work!!! Is it really okay for me to get to do all this stuff with her just because I’m her childhood friend? Wouldn’t her fans totally murder me if they ever found out about this?!”

“Yotsy? Is something wrong?”

“N-Nope, nothing at all...”

In short, I was starting to worry about whether my heart would manage to hold out through the rest of the excursion—in more ways than one.



Childhood memories are super unreliable by nature, and in the decade since our last visit, the aquarium had been remodeled quite a few times. At this point, it had basically been rebuilt from the ground up, so revisiting it now wasn’t really any different than visiting it for the very first time. It had changed so much that I couldn’t even find anything in specific to point out as being different—so much of it was brand new, I just couldn’t see it in those terms.

Makina seemed to be in the same boat as me, in that respect. The moment we entered the aquarium proper, she unfolded a map of the facility and quietly groaned to herself as she perused it. “How are we supposed to revisit all our old memories if the whole place is totally different now...?” she mumbled to herself.

“Ha ha ha... Yeah, true enough,” I said. There wasn’t much of anything nostalgic about the experience so far. If anything, it felt fresh and new. I knew in my head that neither of us were at all to blame for that, but seeing her look so disappointed made me feel a little bad anyway. “B-But you know what? New things can be just as good! You know, like, a ‘new look, same great taste’ sorta deal? I’m sure you’ll end up liking it all over again!” I said. A small part of me was just trying to cheer her up, but I really did mean the vast majority of what I’d said.

This time, I was the one who took Makina's hand. "Let's go!" I said. "We just have to get out there and see the place for ourselves, right?"

"Ah! Yotsy?!" Makina yelped as I set off, pulling her along after me.

If I'm being totally honest, I would've felt like a pathetic excuse for a childhood friend if I'd let her keep the initiative throughout the whole day. If she was going to pull me around, then I'd pull her right back! *Plus, there's no way we'll accomplish our actual objective here if she ends up looking that gloomy all day!*

That last part might sound like I was making excuses, I guess, but I had a feeling that if I *didn't* keep reminding myself what we were here for, I might start taking the whole situation seriously. In other words, I might start thinking that the two of us really *were* dating...and that Makina really *was* in love with me.

Makina's spirits had fallen a little thanks to her disappointment at the aquarium not quite meshing with her expectations, but in the end, that awkward atmosphere barely lasted a moment.

"Oooh, look, Makina!" I exclaimed.

"Wow," Makina gasped.

We'd just passed through the doorway into the aquarium proper and walked through a dark passage. When we stepped out of that hall, we were greeted by a towering tank that took up an entire, enormous wall. It was like they'd somehow managed to carve out a slice of the sea and transport the whole thing intact onto dry land! There was a light somewhere toward the top of the tank that shined down through the water like rays of soft sunlight, and more fish than I could ever hope to count swam freely to and fro. It was a truly grand, truly beautiful spectacle, and both Makina and I spent a moment just standing there, awestruck.

"When we were kids..." Makina muttered.

"Huh?"

"The last time we came here together, I feel like I saw something really similar

to this,” she said, still gazing at the tank as she spoke. “Do you remember it at all? Do you remember what day we went to the aquarium together?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It was your birthday, right?”

“Oh. You really *did* remember,” said Makina.

“Hey! You’re the one who asked, aren’t you?” I jabbed, trying to play it cool and laugh it off...but sadly, the truth was that I *hadn’t* remembered it all, per se. I remembered *how* we’d ended up going to the aquarium together, but it had only come back to me just a moment ago. It was still coming back to me as we spoke, even. “Your mom and dad ended up being busy with work that day, so my dad took the two of us here instead, right?” I asked.

My mom had stayed home to take care of Sakura and Aoi, and my dad had sensed that Makina had needed some space and mostly left taking care of her up to me. I mean, not like a kindergartener could really do much of anything under those circumstances. Makina had been really sad, and in the end, all I’d managed to come up with was holding her hand and hoping it would make her feel better.

Oh, right. Didn’t she...? “You *actually* wanted to go to the zoo, right? You didn’t actually care about fish at all,” I said.

“Wait, you figured that out?!” Makina gasped.

“Not exactly? I mean, you *told* me. You don’t remember?” I asked.

“N-No, I don’t,” Makina said, turning away from me. She looked almost embarrassed—actually, she was *definitely* embarrassed, blushing all the way up to her ears.

“You didn’t have much of a filter back then, did you? You were the sort of kid who’d say anything and everything that popped into her head,” I continued.

“Ugh,” Makina groaned. “Can we stop talking about back when we were kids, please...?”

“But you’re the one who brought it up!” I teased, grinning before I knew it. We’d all changed—me, Makina, and the aquarium alike—and yet, somehow, it still felt like we’d managed to take a step back to those old days, at least a little.

“As far as I’m concerned, the time I came here with you was the best birthday I’ve ever had!” Makina insisted.

“Don’t you think you’re romanticizing it just a little?” I jabbed.

“Mnhh!” Makina pouted at me, her cheeks puffed out indignantly.

“Ha ha ha, okay, I’m sorry!” I said. I’m not gonna say she looked like a *kindergartener* again, but she definitely looked pretty darn childish at the moment—in spite of the fact that up until now, whether on TV as Maki Amagi or right in front of me the moment we’d reunited, she’d always looked incredibly mature in my eyes. “None of the tanks were anywhere near this amazing back then, were they? But the two of us still ended up totally entranced before we knew it.”

“That’s right. But you know, we were a lot littler back then too. The tanks looked way bigger then than they do now...and I was actually a little scared,” Makina said as she gave my hand a squeeze. “Hey, do you remember that one fad? Where people would ask each other what they’d take with them if they were going to be stranded on a deserted island and could only choose one thing?”

“Oh, yeah, that,” I said. “Yeah, I remember people throwing that question around all the time.”

“Well, the first time we came here, as I looked up at that huge fish tank, I had a thought: What if the tank burst, and all of us got swallowed up by the sea in front of us, swept out into the ocean, and wound up on a deserted island somewhere? What would I do then?”

“Ha ha ha! That’s such a *you* thing to worry about, Makina!” I laughed. Makina had been a pretty hardcore pessimist back in the day. You might think that’d make her a gloomy pain to be around, but I’d never felt that way at all. In fact, I thought it was really funny and cute of her, and actually considered it one of her positive traits.

“That’s why I spent the whole time holding onto your hand so tightly—to make sure that even if I *was* swept out to sea, I’d still be okay,” Makina concluded.

“Wait, does that mean you were planning on dragging me to the deserted island with you?!” *Not to brag or anything, but I’m very certain I’d be totally useless in that sort of situation!* There were shoals of fish in that tank, including what looked like a big school of sardines, and I knew for a fact that I wouldn’t be able to catch even one of them if push came to shove.

“I just thought that as long as we were together, I could have fun no matter *where* I was, deserted island or not,” said Makina.

“Y-You think?” I asked.

“Well, I’m certainly having fun now!”

Was staring at fish with me really that fun? I certainly couldn’t give myself credit for it, in any case. It seemed more likely to me that this was just another way in which Makina was a really nice person...but regardless, hearing that from her certainly felt pretty nice. I mean, how many people could say that they were the one thing that somebody else would pick to bring to a...*huh?*

“Wait a minute...doesn’t that mean you think I’m a *thing*?!”

“Oh, you noticed?” said Makina with a sly grin. “Hee hee! Think of this as my payback for how you teased me earlier.”

“I-I wasn’t teasing you or anything!”

“Oh, yes you were!”

We wound up acting like a couple kids, shouting “was not” and “was too” at each other. Neither of us were really serious about it, though, and neither of us could stop ourselves from grinning. It felt...I dunno, nice, somehow.

“C’mon, Yotsy,” said Makina. “There’s still a ton of aquarium left to see! Wanna keep moving?”

“Sure!” I replied.

Looking back, I remembered our first trip here had gone pretty much the same way. We’d been so overwhelmed by that first fish tank that we totally forgot about having really wanted to go to the zoo instead, or even about wanting to make Makina’s birthday something special. Instead, we ended up running around like a couple idiots and embarrassing the heck out of my dad.

We weren't thinking about our pasts, or our futures, or even the present. We'd just lived in the moment without bothering with any of that complicated stuff, and now, it felt like we'd reclaimed a little of that spirit. I was just plain happy to spend time with her like this again.

Of course, she'll definitely still be super disillusioned if she learns about how hopeless I've turned out to be... I've gotta keep it together, just for today! Even I can manage that much!

I psyched myself up once again, more resolved than ever to live up to Makina's expectations as I squeezed her hand in return.



We toured our way through the aquarium, stopping to see a big variety of tanks and displays. Each area had explanations posted describing the traits of the fish on display there. The first area was for fish that lived in chilly parts of the oceans around Japan, and then there was one for fish that lived in areas thick with seaweed, and one for deep-sea fish. Some of them were vibrantly colored, some were fish that people ate on a regular basis, and some were so downright bizarre that I had to stop for a second and question whether they were real fish at all. The aquarium was full to the brim with all the ocean wildlife you could ever hope to see, and it felt like Makina and I were exploring our way through the glimmering depths of the ocean itself. We were completely entranced.

"Look, look! Puffer fish!" said Makina.

"Huh? *Those* are puffer fish?" I asked. "I was kind of expecting them to be more, you know, big and round."

"Right? They're kinda just normal fish. Oh, wait—I have an idea!"

The puffer fish just weren't puffy enough for our liking, so Makina and I ended up puffing up *our* cheeks instead and posing for a selfie in front of their tank.



“Oh, huh! Apparently there’s a type of fish in here that can blend into its surroundings,” said Makina.

“Wait, really?! In here?!”

“They’re probably hiding in the seaweed, or blending in with the ground... Ah, I saw one!”

“What?! Where, where?!”

“Look, right there! By that clump of seaweed!”

“I can’t see it!” I whined, pressing my face up against the little glass window and searching around for the supposedly hidden fish.

That’s pretty much how the excursion went. We walked around, stopping by every tank, chatting and taking pictures all the while. Then, when we’d made it a fair ways into the facility...

“Ah, there it is!” I said. We’d arrived at the most classic of all aquarium attractions—a section sure to steal the hearts of any and all comers!

“It’s such a huge pool,” Makina muttered. “Ah, Yotsy, look! There’s one swimming over there!”

“Huh? Where, where—ah, I see it now!”

A huge crowd of visitors was clustered around the pool, but I could still see well enough to make out the dorsal fin of a dolphin sticking up through the water’s surface as it leisurely swam about. We were in the Ocean’s Woodland Stadium: the area where they put on their dolphin show!

“We saw the show the last time we came here, didn’t we?!” I exclaimed.

“We did!” said Makina with an excited nod. “Though the pool wasn’t anywhere near this impressive back then.”

“This is perfect—we should watch it!” I said. “There’s gotta be a schedule around here somewhere... Ah, there it is!”

The show schedule was posted on a signboard by the stairs leading down to the stadium’s seats. It turned out there were five shows a day, once every hour and a half, and the next one was due in about an hour.

“Looks like it’ll be a little while,” said Makina.

“In that case, why don’t we look around a little more before... Oh, wait, I have an idea! Why don’t we take this chance to eat lunch?”

“Lunch? Here?” said Makina. “But the only food we could get *here’s* popcorn and candy and stuff.”

“Heh heh heh! You’d think that, wouldn’t you?!” I said, smirking at Makina’s bewilderment. Then I pulled the lunch box that I’d prepared specifically for today out from my bag! “Ta-da! We’ve got lunch right here!”

“Did you make a lunch box for us, Yotsy?!” Makina gasped.

“Heh heh, you bet I did! But, I mean...I was kinda all over the place this morning, so it might not be super great...”

I’d smirked, sure, but the lunch I’d made wasn’t exactly smirk-worthy. The truth is that after my accidental all-nighter, I’d only managed to get up early enough to spend a frantic thirty minutes throwing our meal together. Making a full lunch in that sort of time frame meant making every second count, and I’d ended up warming up leftovers from the night before while I threw together some rolled omelets, sautéed some little sausages, and stuff like that. You know, easy things I could slap together in the blink of an eye. Now that I was actually here and in my right mind again, though, I was starting to suspect that a lunch like *this* wasn’t even close to good enough to offer to her. *Am I being super reckless right now, or is it just me?!*

I glanced up at Makina and gasped. She had a sort of bewildered look on her face, and it made my heart pound like a drum. “I-I mean, you probably wouldn’t like something like this, huh...?” I mumbled with an air of profound awkwardness. I’d only just brought the lunch box out, and now I wanted nothing more than to shove it right back into my bag.

Personally speaking, I’d honestly have to say that my cooking was the one thing I could show off with. I’d helped with all the household chores since I was a kid, but you didn’t exactly get many chances to display your skills to the world at large when it came to cleaning or doing laundry. There weren’t *that* many chances for me to show off my cooking either, to be fair, but I was still confident that I was pretty good at it.

That's the thing, though. I was just *pretty* good at it, and Makina was an idol. She'd probably had the chance to sample all sorts of delicacies for her work *and* in her private life. I had this image in my mind of celebrities eating out every meal of every day, or using super rare, expensive, and sophisticated ingredients and seasonings that I'd probably never heard of when they *did* get around to cooking at home. Makina's normal and my normal were very different things, and the foods I thought were tasty might've been anything but by her standards.

O-Oh, jeez! How could I be so ridiculously reckless?! This is a total failure! I've blown it again! Seriously, how did I not realize any of this yesterday?! If I'd just thought about it a little before jumping into action, maybe I would've—

"Ah..."

"Huh?! What's wrong, Makina?!"

As I moved to cram the box back into my bag, Makina—for reasons I couldn't comprehend—let out a quiet gasp and, a moment later, started crying.

"I-I'm sorry! I, I just..." Makina choked out.

"Er, no, I mean, umm," I stammered, frozen stiff as she did her best to wipe her tears away. Part of me thought that if either of us had an excuse to cry, it was probably me. I mean, okay, maybe it wasn't *that* bad, but I couldn't even begin to figure out what I'd done wrong enough to bring her to tears.

"It's not what you think," Makina sniffed. "I'm just...s-so happy..."

"You're...*happy*?"

"Well, I didn't think you'd make *lunch* for me! It never even crossed my mind!" Makina shouted, suddenly seeming kind of worked up and talking at a mile a minute. I knew instantly that she wasn't making it up—it was completely obvious she wasn't even close to composed enough to fib in the moment. "I just...I kept doubting myself, is all. I kept thinking that maybe you only came along with me today because you felt obligated to," she said.

"That's not—" I began, but Makina kept talking, not letting me get a word in edgewise.

“That would’ve been fine too, of course! No matter how it happened, just getting to be with you like this is meaningful to me,” Makina said.

She was talking about the matter with the gossip magazine, I was sure. That was the whole point of this date, and I hadn’t forgotten it. I remembered, for sure. I’d remembered it the moment she’d brought it up, at the very least. And yet...

“Thanks, Yotsy.”

“Uh...huh?” I grunted.

“I was just so happy you put in the effort to make something for today. I just couldn’t stop it from spilling out, and I ended up crying, of all things.”

“Makina...” I said. “Do you really want it? I mean, *I* made it, so it’s definitely nothing special!”

“Of *course* it’s special! *Nothing’s* more special than having the girl you love make something for you!”

“The girl...you love...?” I repeated.

“Ah?!” Makina squeaked. “I-I, umm, th-that was just a figure of speech!” she stammered, shaking her head wildly.

Oh, wow, that freaked me out for a second... In retrospect, it was obvious she’d meant that she loved me as an old friend. I’d really thought she’d opened up about having a *thing* for me for a second, though... *Ugh, I can tell I’m blushing so hard right now! I already went through this before when she asked me to fake-date her, so why’s it hitting me so hard again?*

Not that it was *my* fault I was embarrassed—Makina was just as much to blame! Her face was bright red and she had tears pooling in the corners of her eyes... It was *just* like last time; her act was so good, there was just *no way* I could’ve seen through it! And, like, of course it was! She was a mega-popular idol, for crying out loud, and I was just some rando pleb! *Couldn’t she, I don’t know, hold back on me a little, or something? I really wouldn’t mind it if she decided to go easy on me, thanks!*

“U-Umm, Yotsy?!”

“*Wha—yeah?!* ” I yelped.

“If you wouldn’t mind, umm...can we eat right now?!” Makina asked. “You can’t just wave something like that under my nose and tell me I have to wait, right? That’d be just awful!”

“Oh! Sure, I guess. G-Go ahead,” I timidly agreed, overwhelmed by the weird amount of pressure she was suddenly exuding. I was still super hesitant to let her eat it, honestly. Makina had made appearances on countless food shows, sampling the food from restaurants famous enough to have lines stretching out their doors, after all...*but to heck with it! I’ve come this far, and I can’t back out now! Whatever happens, happens!*

“Let’s sit over there, then!” Makina said, then pulled me toward the seating area for the dolphin show. Food and drinks were permitted there, as long as there wasn’t a show running at the moment, and since there was an hour to go, the stands were pretty empty. There were just a few groups here and there, eating lunch like us.

“Okay, I’m opening it up!” said Makina.

“G-Great,” I mumbled nervously as I watched her lift the lid off my lunch box. It was full of rice balls, rolled omelets, fried chicken, and little sausages...and looking at it with fresh eyes, I realized that I’d more or less packed a lunch exclusively comprised of the sort of foods a teenage boy would ask for.

I’d known that our date would be at the aquarium, but still, the weather forecast said it’d be over thirty degrees Celsius out today and I knew we’d probably be sweating it up. I’d tried to pack a pretty salty lunch, considering that, but in retrospect I might’ve gone a little overboard. I *would’ve* gone out of my way to make a lunch that Makina would like, but surely what little I remembered from kindergarten wouldn’t have been enough to—

“Octopuses,” Makina quietly muttered.

“Huh?”

“The sausages. You cut them to look like little octopuses. I used to love these,” she said as she lifted one of the sausages with her chopsticks. Her smile was sort of reserved, and reminded me vividly of the old her from back in

kindergarten. “We were still a family back then...” she muttered.

“Still a...huh?”

“Can I eat now, Yotsy?”

“Uh... Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks.”

There was something really earnest about the air around Makina in that moment, but at the same time, something lonely as well. Whatever it was, it distracted me so much I totally forgot to open the lunch box I’d packed for myself and just stared at her instead.

“It’s delicious,” Makina practically whispered after a bite or two. “It’s really good. Good enough to bring a tear to my eye...”

She wasn’t lying, and wasn’t just trying to make me feel better. Her words were so plain and direct that I knew for sure, and I found myself moved by them. I’m pretty sure she was the first person to be so plainly, honestly pleased to eat my cooking.

“This feels so strange,” said Makina. “It’s not like I saw you make it, and it’s not like I’ve ever eaten your cooking before, but the second I tried it, I could tell in an instant that you cooked this. It tastes warm, and kind...and I love it.”

“C-C’mon, you’re exaggerating!” I said.

“No, I’m not!” Makina shouted. “If anything, I’m frustrated that my vocabulary’s not good enough to express how delicious it really is... If I’d known this was going to happen, I would’ve tried to get on more food programs!”

Part of me wanted to ask how *that* could’ve possibly been the lesser priority, but I found myself too embarrassed to look her in the eye, much less make a comment like that.

“It almost feels like a shame to eat it all in one sitting... Ugh...” Makina groaned.

“You’re actually *worrying* about it now?!” I exclaimed. “If you really like it that much, I can always just make it again some—”

“Will you, really?!” Makina shouted, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she cut me off.

I’d made the offer in the heat of the moment, but after a reaction like *that*, I couldn’t exactly retract it. *This is fine, right? People cook for their friends, don’t they? That’s not weird at all!* I didn’t have much experience with the whole “having friends” thing, myself, but my general understanding was that friends tended to be pretty casual and familiar with each other. Considering that, promising to cook for a friend wasn’t a weird thing to do at all! Probably!

“Yeah, of course!” I said. “I’d be happy to, if it means this much to you.”

“Yotsy... It’s a promise! You can’t take it back, okay?!” Makina said, clasping my hands between hers and gazing at me with a look of purest glee.

“Y-Yeah, sure!” I said, bowing to the incredible pressure of her expectations.



“That was just so delicious!”

“Thanks! I’m just glad you liked it.”

Before I knew it, Makina had finished her meal. She’d eaten up every last bit—the rice balls, the omelets, the chicken, and of course the sausages—declaring it was delicious with each and every new dish. Speaking as the girl who’d made her lunch, I thought her reaction was the best I could’ve possibly asked for. In fact, I’d been so absorbed in watching her savor each and every bite that I’d only made it halfway through my own meal so far.

I wonder if Makina’s still hungry? Part of me considered offering her some of my remaining food, but I also thought it might be a little rude to offer and imply she was a glutton. *But, I mean, I can’t exactly make her sit around and wait while I finish—*

“Your omelets look delicious indeed!”

“Oh! Do you want one?!” I asked.

“Yes, indeed!”

Oh, thank goodness! Since I couldn’t really offer my food to her apropos of nothing, Makina asking for it herself was the best possible solution! I let out an

internal sigh of relief as a hand reached over from my left to pluck a piece of omelet out of my lunch box and—*wait, my left?*

“Y-Yotsy?” Makina stammered from off to my *right*, her eyes wide with shock.

Okay, yeah, she was sitting to my right, wasn't she? Then who the heck just...?!

“Mmmh! Delicious indeed!” said the cute little girl to my left, pressing a hand to her cheek as she chewed away happily!

“Emma?!”

“Emma indeed!”

It was Emma!!!

Emma Shizumi was a first-year student at my high school. She was also half-Swedish, and had moved to Japan from—okay, but for real, just how many times is she going to show up out of absolutely nowhere and force me to deliver this bit of exposition?!

And showing up out of nowhere is exactly what she did. Emma had a way of popping up before I knew it, and this time was no exception. She was sitting next to me like it was the most natural thing in the world, and I had no clue how long she'd been there. *Seriously, how is that even possible?! And what's she doing here, anyway?! This aquarium isn't even particularly close to our school!*

“This is a coincidence indeed, Yotsuba!” said Emma.

“N-No kidding,” I said. “Good to see you, Emma.”

“Indeed!” Emma chirped, then leaned in and nuzzled her head against my shoulder.

Cute! She's a certifiable angel, all right!



She was wearing one of the goth-loli-style ensembles that it seemed were her casual, everyday outfits, which both looked ridiculously good on her and made her look like a princess who'd snuck out to play around at the aquarium in secret.

And, like, is it just me or is she acting like she's really attached to me right now?! I guess that's not new—sorta feels like every time I run into her, she skips over the next few steps on her affection meter for me—but seriously, she's acting like a Pomeranian that just found its owner! Just look at that innocent, unreserved smile she's got plastered over her face—it's ridiculous! And she smells really nice too! Is she wearing perfume? And, like, she's always super pretty in a way that makes it pretty clear she has some non-Japanese heritage, so that's nothing new, but she's downright glowing today! Maybe she put on a little makeup too, or something? But, I mean, I've barely known her for long at all, and definitely not long enough for us to be this familiar with each other, so having her stuck to me this much is starting to make me really nervous! But she really is just so cute, like, seriously! The way she appears out of nowhere feels like it's going to give me a heart attack one of these days, sure, but having her around feels like a big enough perk that I can totally put up with that. I was super nervous and kinda scared when Koganezaki's voice made a guest appearance in my mindscape, but if Emma were the one who'd shown up, I bet it would've been super chill and relaxing instead! Maybe if she keeps getting more and more attached to me, I could take her in as my third little sister? I bet Sakura and Aoi would be super happy to have her in the family! Then the three of us could all get together and dote on her... Oh, but since Emma's only one grade below me, I guess that'd make her the second oldest? Not that that'd be a problem or anything—an older sister getting doted on by her little sisters is super adorable in its own sorta way, and it'd feel just plain right for Emma! I wonder how many more times she'll have to appear out of nowhere before we get to the becoming-my-little-sister stage? Hee hee hee...ha ha ha ha ha ha—

“Hawaaaugh?!” I yelped as I suddenly picked up on an *incredibly* intense stare coming at me from my right side!

“Yotsy...”

“Y-Yes, Makina?”

“Is she a friend of yours?” Makina asked as she flashed me a *perfect* smile. This wasn’t like the other smiles she’d shown me today, though. This was a smile with *drive*—a smile worthy of a girl who’d climbed all the way to the top of the entertainment world single-handedly.

“Ah, no, I mean, she’s my little sist—my underclassman! She’s a first-year at my high school!”

“Little sist? Indeed? Did you mean cyst?”

“That was one of those lines you’re supposed to just let drop without commenting on it, Emma!” I frantically whispered, then turned back to Makina. “Makina, this is Emma Shizumi! Emma, this is Makina Oda! Okay, we’re all friends now, nice to meet everyone!”

I’d come dangerously close to letting my secret desires slip out, and Emma had come dangerously close to picking up on them, but I’d managed to get us through our introductions anyway. Okay, so maybe it wasn’t the most elegant solution! Got a problem with that?!

“Makina? Indeed? Well, nice to meet you!” said Emma with a smile that was as bright and friendly as could be.

“It’s, umm...n-nice to meet you too,” said Makina, who seemed a little less comfortable with this particular first encounter than Emma was. I understood how she felt. After all, I was pretty sure she was going through the exact same mental journey I’d experienced the first time I met Emma.

“By the way—why are you here, Emma?” I asked.

“Why?” Emma repeated, cocking her head.

“Ah, umm, I just meant that it’s kind of a crazy coincidence for us to both go to the same aquarium on the same day,” I said.

“Oh, indeed! This *is* the first time I’ve seen you here!” said Emma.

Something struck me as just a little weird about the way she’d phrased that, but before I had the chance to question her, Emma pulled something out of her little pouch and held it out for me to see.

“Is that...an annual pass?”

“Indeed!”

I’d learned that the Ocean’s Woodland Aquarium sold an annual pass just a little while beforehand, while we were at the ticket booth. It cost an astonishing four thousand yen, which meant that if you were paying the high schooler admission rate of a thousand five hundred yen a trip, you’d only have to go, uhh...three times, I think? You’d probably only have to go three times a year for the annual pass to be a better deal than buying the tickets each time! At least I, uhh...I *think* that’s right?

Anyway, the point is that buying an annual pass meant that you could go to the aquarium whenever you wanted, as many times as you wanted, and always get in free! And the fact that Emma had one of those passes meant that it wasn’t like she’d just happened to choose the same day to visit the aquarium as we had. It was more like we’d just happened to choose to visit on one of the days that she’d be here!

Not that any of this actually matters at all!!!

“Did you make your lunch box yourself, Yotsuba?” asked Emma.

“Yeah, I did,” I said.

“I thought so! It has your scent, indeed!”

“It, uh...has my *scent*?” I repeated, confused again. *So, wait—does that mean that I’m made up of rice balls, rolled omelets, fried chicken, and sausages? Wouldn’t I get attacked by wild cats and stuff if I smelled like those?*

Meanwhile, Emma was paying no attention to my reaction whatsoever and had leaned in to sniff my lunch box. I was starting to feel really embarrassed by all the attention, and Makina’s stare was growing more intense by the second!

“I knew it! I love this scent indeed!” Emma declared.

“O-Oh, do you?” I said.

“I could just eat you right up!”

“You *what*?!” I yelped with shock...as did Makina, actually. It took me a

second to realize that Emma's eyes had been glued to my food when she'd made her shocking declaration. "Wait...were you talking to my lunch just now?" I asked.

"Indeed!"

"Y-Yeah, of course you were!" I said, letting out a sigh of relief that Makina once again echoed. "In that case, would you like some more?" I added as I held my lunch box out to her.

"May I?! That would be wonderful indeed! I love you, Yotsuba!" Emma exclaimed, then accepted it with a beaming smile.

"She's...rather eccentric, isn't she?" commented Makina, who sounded a little dazed.

"No kidding," I said with a slightly tired chuckle.

To be honest, Emma was still largely a mystery in my mind. Normally I'd be jealous of how free-spirited she was, but she just took it so far I found myself thinking that living that way would be kind of exhausting in its own right. Still, though...

"*Mmmh!* This is delicious indeed!"

...watching her eat my lunch as if it were the single tastiest meal the world had to offer made it feel like none of that really mattered. She was just so cute, I felt a pressing desire to set up an Emma feeder by my house or something. But around the time I started seriously considering making her lunches every day when summer vacation ended and we went back to school, a new voice rang out.

"Emmmaaa! Oh, *there* you—wait, *Emma*? What on *earth* are you doing?!"

O-Oh, does she have a chaperone? I thought for the barest of seconds, but immediately reconsidered. *Emma's chaperone? I know exactly who that must be!*

"Sister dearest!"

"Is that...Hazama?"

"K-Koganezaki?!"

I shouldn't have even had to think about it, really. Of *course* it was Mai Koganezaki, a remarkably mature girl in my grade who served as my part-time fearsome foe, part-time trusted ally, and now part-time internal monologue advisor. Emma practically idolized Koganezaki as an elder-sister figure, and I could see why. She had a helpful, broad-minded side that made her the ideal older sibling.

I was surprised to see that Koganezaki wasn't wearing her school uniform today. I mean, okay, maybe that's kind of a given since it was summer vacation, but it felt like a rarity to me. She always made a point of putting on her uniform whenever we met, for some strange reason. Seeing her dressed so casually felt, like...really fresh, I suppose? She looked really pretty too, needless to say!

"What are you doing here...? And who is she?" asked Koganezaki, her gaze drifting to Makina—who, at some point, had apparently wrapped her arm around mine.

"Ah, umm, she's—" I began.

"We're on a date," interjected Makina.

"Huh?" Koganezaki grunted.

"We're on a *date*!" Makina repeated, but louder this time. It almost felt like she was asserting ownership of me, and she squeezed my arm tighter than ever while narrowing her eyes into a sharp, catlike glare.

No, wait, that's not a cat's glare! That's the aura of a wolf! Not a wolf on the hunt, though—she's a wolf that's pulling out all the intimidation stops to protect her friends or the prey she already brought down! I had to imagine that she was acting this way out of wariness toward Koganezaki, but considering the situation, I had a feeling it was going to end up backfiring on her pretty badly. Actually, Koganezaki's hostile vibe—which was directed one hundred percent at me, by the way—was *already* more intense than it had been to start, and was escalating by the second! The air was tense, and it felt like the slightest spark could set off a full-blown battle! *How'd the situation get this critical this quickly?! Wh-Wh-What should I do?!*

"Oooh, a date? My dearest sister and I are out on a date as well!" Emma piped up. The comfy, gentle atmosphere we'd been enjoying until Koganezaki

showed up had vanished away in an instant, but apparently Emma wasn't equipped to notice that sort of thing and was still carrying on as if everything were perfectly normal.

"O-Oh, really? You too? What a *crazy* coincidence!" I shouted, seizing the opportunity she'd given me for all it was worth. This ship was sinking fast, and she'd cast out a lifeboat at the perfect moment for me to bail out and row like mad!

"..."

"..."

Oooh jeez, so much for that! Koganezaki and Makina hadn't been dissuaded by my and Emma's charming conversation in the slightest. They were totally ignoring us, actually, and I could practically see the sparks flying between their steely glares. *Yup. I've been here before. This is definitely one of those times where anything I say is just going to make this worse.*

"Will you eat too, Yotsuba? Say ahh!"

Emma, no! Stop! Not even a perfectly innocent angel like you could get away with ignoring an atmosphere like this to feed someone by hand! And not even I'd be dumb enough to give into that sort of temptation, considering—

"Ahhh! Mmmh, that *is* good!"

"Indeed, indeed!"

The fried chicken was so juicy, it was like an explosion of flavor in my—*gah!!! I-I gave in like it was nothing?!*

"Yotsy..."

"Hazama..."

O-Oh jeez, oh jeez! Now Makina and Koganezaki were both giving me that "Is this girl crazy or what?" look! Their stares had me shivering! *It's not what you think, really! I promise I'm taking this seriously and trying to be respectful and stuff! I just can't resist a top-tier angel like Emma!*

"Oh, the dolphin show is about to start! You should sit down with us, sister dearest!" said Emma.

“Yes... I suppose I should,” Koganezaki agreed with a nod.

“Oh, but there aren’t enough seats... Ah, I have a perfect idea indeed!” Emma announced, then stood up, turned to face me, and...

“*Whahuh?!* ” Makina yelped.

“Emma?! ” Koganezaki exclaimed.

...plopped herself down right onto my lap!

“E-E-E-Emma?! ” I babbled.

“Indeed, now there’s plenty of space for my dearest sister to sit with us!” Emma proudly explained.

I-I mean, I guess that’s true...but still! Emma just felt so warm on my lap, and so soft, and she smelled so *nice!* *I-It’s no use! I can’t escape!* Worse still, it seemed the fact that some part of me was fawning over Emma was written all over my face. Makina’s and Koganezaki’s silent glares had reached a level of frigid I could only describe as absolute zero.

Ugggh, come on, Emma! I’m starting to think you’re too much of an angel! Maybe if you let your devilish side out at least a little bit, it’d help you pick up on all the social cues that’re flying over your head...?

“I can hardly wait for the dolphin show! This is exciting indeed, isn’t it, Yotsuba?” asked Emma

“Yuuup,” I squealed uncomfortably. *On second thought, maybe she’s plenty devilish after all!*

On that day, I realized that angels and devils were two sides of the same coin, and came to the inescapable conclusion that it was only a matter of time before Emma made a guest appearance in my mindscape like Koganezaki before her.



After we watched the dolphin show, the four of us sort of just ended up naturally sticking together and strolling around the aquarium as a group...

“So, then? I assume you have a very good explanation for what, exactly, is going on here?”

...and I ended up getting subjected to another of Koganezaki's interrogations! She came right out and hit me with it head-on, but this time, I managed to stay cool. I think the conversation with Mindscape Koganezaki I'd had before probably helped prepare me for this, on an emotional level. I wasn't going to yield to her relentless pressure! I was going to stand strong! I'd discarded my old weaknesses, and no matter *how* pointed of a glare she shot toward me, I'd be *totally*—

"Your legs are trembling, Hazama."

"*Hyeeek?!"*

"It's not exactly pleasant to have someone act that scared of you, you know? I'd appreciate if you'd stop it."

I was *not* totally fine. At all. My mental conversation hadn't granted me any resistance to her pressure in the slightest!

I glanced in front of us, where Emma was dragging Makina along by the hand. Makina turned around to give me a concerned glance, and I did my best to smile and wave at her in a "everything's all fine back here!" sort of way. *Was that convincing? Did I pull off the smile?* I was trying really hard not to smile *too* much—after all, I could easily imagine Koganezaki getting all "what're *you* smirking about?" at me if I did!

"Anyway," Koganezaki sighed, "let's get back on topic. I'd rather not spend any more of my summer vacation interrogating you than I absolutely have to. That said, I hope you can appreciate that I can't exactly turn a blind eye to this."

"Y-Yeah, makes sense," I admitted. I didn't even have to ask what she wanted to talk about, or why she wanted the two of us to be alone for the conversation.

"Of course, considering this is you we're talking about, I assume I'll have to be more specific with my questioning if I want a proper answer," Koganezaki continued. "So, let me start over..."

I mean, of course she wants to ask about Makina. What else would she—

"Why are you out on a date with Maki Amagi?"

"Bwaaaaaugh?!" Oh jeez, that was so much more specific of an opening than

I was expecting! N-No, wait! Calm down, Yotsuba Hazama! This is one of Koganezaki's classic traps! It's, like, that thing where you start out with a deliberately ridiculous proposal to make the one you're actually aiming for feel reasonable in comparison! "Maki...Amagi? Hmmm? Who could *that* be? Why, I've *never* heard of *anyone* named Maki Amagi!"

"Why are you talking in a robotic monotone? You can't possibly think that's going to throw me off this line of questioning?"

Crap! She's on to me!!!

"And why do you look surprised? How could you possibly talk your way out of *that*?" Koganezaki asked, gesturing toward Makina.

"Ugggh," I moaned. "Why do you even know about Maki Amagi to begin with...?"

"Well, she's a celebrity, isn't she? I can tell she's made the bare minimum effort to disguise herself, at least, but I still got the sense I'd seen her somewhere before, and it didn't take long at all to realize why."

Koganezaki made it sound like figuring out Makina's identity was only natural, but on the other hand, we'd made it all the way to the aquarium without a single person realizing who she was and saying something. Considering that, it once again struck me that Koganezaki was sort of incredible. *Come to think of it, considering how popular she is these days, this whole place is probably gonna fly into a panic the second somebody calls Makina out. I guess I should actually feel lucky that Koganezaki was the one who—wait a second!*

"Are you a fan of hers, Koganezaki?!" I gasped. "N-No, don't do it! I know it must be super tempting to take sneak photos of her, but you can't! That's *illegal!*"

"I wouldn't, and I'm not really a fan of hers to begin with."

"You figured out who she is without being her fan?"

"It doesn't take a fan to recognize Maki Amagi on sight these days. She's been all over the news, hasn't she?" Koganezaki countered, shutting down my line of questioning with a perfect, ten-out-of-ten rebuttal.

“Okay, but, like...it’s *crazy*, right? How could I end up out on a date with the sort of ultra-popular idol that literally everyone in the whole country knows about? Isn’t that totally unthinkable, from a commonsense perspective?”

“I’ve long since concluded that ‘common sense’ is a complete non-factor when you’re in the picture.”

“Was that a compliment?”

“Oh, *very* much so.”

Yippee!

“As such, whether you claim that you went out on a date with a genuine pop idol, that you lost an argument with your imaginary friend, or that you were possessed by a literal god that granted you a divine revelation to preach to the masses, I can assure you that I’ll approach the issue operating under the assumption that everything you tell me is, somehow, true.”

“O-Okay, I guess.” This was starting to sound a *little* over the top, but the bit about me losing an argument with an imaginary friend was close enough to how my inner devil and inner Koganezaki had beaten me to a verbal pulp, so I couldn’t really deny it.

“Considering all that, I wouldn’t be even remotely surprised to learn that the girl you’re with is the real Maki Amagi, or that she’s fallen in love with you, or that the two of you have decided to go out on a happy little date together. I could accept all of that without question.”

“Y-You could, huh?”

Koganezaki fell silent. *That’s a pretty sharp glare from someone who just finished telling me she could accept what’s going on, huh...? I mean, I know sharp glares from her are pretty much business as usual, but it seems even sharper than—wait! Could it be?! Could it be that this isn’t just any old glare...? It’s a murder glare?! It couldn’t be—but no, it is! I’m a certified expert when it comes to appraising Koganezaki’s glares, at this point, so there’s no doubt about it!*

“Umm, Koganezaki?” I said. “Are you going to murder—*ahem, ahem!*—are you upset with me?”

“I’m not upset,” said Koganezaki. “I’m just astounded.”

“Huh? You’re *astounded*?” Okay, so maybe that wasn’t an imminent-murder sort of aura after all! Phew! Looks like I’ll have to turn in my Koganezaki glare appraisal qualifications, though.

“You do realize that, considering you’re dating both members of the Sacrosanct, the fact that you’re currently out on a date with a *different* girl who *also* loves you is a problem, yes?” Koganezaki continued.

“Ugh,” I grunted. She knew perfectly well that I was dating Yuna and Rinka, so it went without saying that she wouldn’t look kindly on me hanging out with another girl one-on-one like this. All the more so considering that she was only tolerating my two-timing those two so long as I could manage to preserve the equilibrium in their relationship that had—*huh? Wait a second.*

“Hey, Zaki?”

“Do *not* abbreviate my name like that.”

“I kinda just noticed something. Is it just me, or are you assuming that Makina...er, assuming that the girl I’m here with, you know...*likes me* likes me? Like, in *that* sort of way...?”

“I wouldn’t call it an assumption, per se. It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Uh...no? N-Nope, no way! Of *course* it’s not true! There’s absolutely no way in heck Makina’s in *love* with me—that’s *crazy!!!*”

For a second, I hadn’t even been able to process what she’d said to me. The moment my mind *did* catch up with her words, though, I shouted out an instant, reflexive denial. I’d specifically said she didn’t *love* me, of course—not that she didn’t *like* me—since I *did* sorta get the sense that she had some sort of feelings for me, in her own sort of way...but, like, not like *that*! No way!

“It’s, umm...it’s all an act!” I explained.

“How do you mean?” Koganezaki asked skeptically.

“Well, the truth is... Umm, you’re not gonna tell anyone about any of this, right?”

“If you don’t want me to, then no, I won’t.”

“You’re not gonna leak it on social media, right?!”

“No, I’m not. I don’t use those sites to begin with.”

“Okay, then! This’ll be our secret—just you and me! Uh...come over here for a minute!” I said, then dragged Koganezaki off to a quiet, largely abandoned corner of the area we were in. Then I leaned in and whispered into her ear.

“Psst—you’re right! Makina really is Shooting Star’s Maki Amagi, the super-famous idol who just announced that she’s taking a break from show biz! She’s also my childhood friend—though, really, we only knew each other during kindergarten? She moved away, and we hadn’t talked at all past that point, but then she moved back again just the other day! She put her idol work on pause so she can focus on school, apparently. The thing is, there’s this actor she worked with on a TV drama, and there’s a rumor going around that she’s going out with him, and *Makina* says that’s not true at all, but this one tabloid caught wind of the story and now she’s got paparazzi following her around. That’ll make it really hard for her to focus on school, and it could cause trouble for the people around her too, so she had to do something to fix the situation, and she ended up coming to me for help. The idea’s that if I pretend to date her, and the paparazzi catches us together and takes pictures or something, it’ll clear that first rumor right up! You know, since same-sex relationships are kind of a sensitive subject and all? Like, they’d have to tread really lightly with the story or they might end up getting bashed harder than her for whatever they publish! Oh, but that last part’s just my guess; I’m not actually sure if that’s exactly what she’s going for. The point is that I wanted to help her, and that’d mean pretending to be her girlfriend, but as you know I already *have* two of those, so we ended up deciding that we’d keep it to one day only, and I’d go out with her for just—”

“This is *way* too much information to be psst-worthy, don’t you think?!” Koganezaki snapped, apparently unable to take it any longer. Side note: hearing her do the little “psst” sound was *extremely* cute, and I filed the memory away into my mental “precious moments” folder. “Plus, the way I could feel your breath on me throughout the whole thing was making me sort of uncomfortable...”

“But you get what’s going on now, right?!”

“‘But’ yourself!”

“Ouch?!” I yelped as Kogakezaki karate-chopped the top of my head, then glared down at me as she pulled out a handkerchief to wipe her hand off with. *I’m not dirty, I promise!*

“I *do* understand the circumstances now, yes,” Koganezaki continued. “You and Maki Ama—that is to say, you and Makina are on a date together in order to feign a romantic relationship. Right?”

“Right,” I moaned, massaging my head.

“It’s strange, though,” Koganezaki continued. “Considering how attached to you she’s been acting, I have a hard time imagining that she *isn’t* genuinely in love with you.”

“Well, *sure*, but she’s the most popular actress in the country for a reason!” I countered. “Trust me, when she decides to pull out all her acting stops, it’s *totally* impossible to tell whether or not she’s serious!”

I’d experienced that phenomenon on several occasions today alone, and it had made my head spin each and every time. In that sense, I could understand where Koganezaki was coming from. This was an act. Nothing more than pretend...but if I didn’t take time to remind myself of that fact every once in a while, it felt like I might forget about it altogether.

“Fair enough,” said Koganezaki. “Assuming you’re telling the truth, I can’t deny the possibility that I’m just being paranoid.”

“I-I mean, I can’t exactly blame you at this point, I guess,” I muttered.

“That being said, Hazama, you need to understand that a sufficiently well-crafted lie is no different from the truth.”

A good enough lie’s no different from the truth? Koganezaki’s words carried a certain weight, in spite of the fact that I only *vaguely* understood what she was trying to tell me, at best. I couldn’t come up with a decent reply, in any case, and fell into silence...and then Koganezaki laid a gentle hand upon my shoulder.

“I love you.”

“*Bwhaaa?!’*”

“I adore you, truly, from the bottom of my heart. Ever since I learned you were two-timing the Sacrosanct, I’ve been beside myself with jealousy. I’m so sorry.”

“Wha, but, wha?! Koganezaki?! Wh-Where the heck is this coming from?!” I yelped. The revelation had come from so far out of left field, I was left in a state of flustered, incoherent panic. *Koganezaki’s in love with me?! Seriously?! I mean, sure, she’s been really nice to me, and she’s gone pretty out of her way to help me when stuff happens, but I thought that was just because she’s a nice person by nature...? Anyway, what should I do?! Heeelp! Where are my inner angel and devil when I need them most?!*



Koganezaki paused, then sighed. “I really do worry about you,” she said, her tone laced with exhausted exasperation.

“Uhh?” I blurted.

“I was lying.”

“Huh? You were *lying*?”

“Yes, and lying so blatantly I think just about anyone could’ve picked up on it. It was such a flagrant lie, I really have to wonder why I had to say it in the first place. Why should I have to pretend to love *you*? Anyone with an ounce of common sense would tell you it’s pure nonsense.”

Wait, is it just me, or is she getting mad at me now?! I had to admit that she was right, though. Looking back with a clearer head, I thought the odds of Koganezaki falling for me were literally zilch. Zip. Zero. Not a *chance*.

“My question to you,” Koganezaki continued, “is why you think you could ever see through the acting of Maki Amagi—a celebrity talented enough to move the whole nation of Japan with her performances—when you were just fooled by a transparent lie that I wasn’t even trying particularly hard to sell?”

“Ugh!”

“Not to mention that *your* perceptions are only part of the problem.”

“Huh? Who else...?”

“Momose and Aiba. I can’t imagine that your *actual* girlfriends would find the revelation that you’d gone out on a date with another girl especially pleasant.”

“O-Oh, nah, that’s not a problem at all!” I said. “I already talked with them about all this, and got permission and everything, so—”

“You got their permission?” Koganezaki repeated with a sharp glint in her eye. It sort of felt like I’d just stepped on a conversational land mine, and I shrank away from her reflexively. “I take back what I said about being astounded by you. I think you really are just an idiot after all.”

“Ugh... Sorry,” I dejectedly muttered. I mean, I already *knew* I was an idiot, of course, but having someone else say it straight up was still kind of

depressing...but *that* wasn't the important part! The implication that I'd failed to notice something important was a lot more distressing than getting called an idiot.

"Let's assume that one of them—it doesn't really matter which—came to you with the same sort of story that you went to them with. What would you think about that?" said Koganezaki.

"Huh?" I grunted.

"Imagine one of your girlfriends told you that she had a very special friend whom you'd never met. That friend asked her to pretend to be her girlfriend and go out on a date with her, emphasizing that it would *just* be an act, and nothing more. How would you feel if you were put in that sort of situation?"

"I'd... Umm..."

"And speaking of Momose and Aiba, think about what *their* relationship means to them. The two of them were able to become the Sacrosanct because of how special and significant their childhood friendship is. Now, imagine how they must have felt upon learning that a supposed loner like you had a childhood friend of her own all along. I'd think *that* would be plenty impactful in its own right."

So, like...Yuna is to Rinka what Rinka is to Yuna...and what Makina is to me...? I was starting to understand. Yuna and Rinka had told me that they'd been able to build up the Sacrosanct image by using the interest that their peers took in their relationship and exaggerating it, more or less. Of *course* they'd understand how profoundly significant a childhood friendship looks in the eyes of the people around you.

"So...are you saying that when they gave me their permission, they didn't really mean it? Were they lying to me...?" I asked.

"I...wouldn't necessarily say that. Not with complete certainty, anyway. I'm sure that you were being completely sincere about just wanting to help your friend, and I'd imagine the two of them understood that as well, and wanted to respect your feelings," said Koganezaki. It felt like she was trying to cheer me up, but there was a gloom to her expression that contrasted with her words. "People are weak, though. It's just as likely that deep down, they were also

thinking that they *didn't* want their girlfriend going out on a date with someone else, even if it *was* just an act. They just might've also thought that if they admitted that to you, you'd hold it against them."

I gasped. "But—no way..."

Koganezaki shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have speculated like that. That was rude of me, to you, Momose, and Aiba alike."

I couldn't find the right reply to her apology, or the right words to follow up with in general. After all, I didn't think she was entirely wrong. *I mean, if I were put in that position...that's probably exactly what I'd think. I'd desperately hold back my worries and anxieties, and force myself to smile instead...*

I tried to remember what sort of faces Yuna and Rinka had made back when I'd had that conversation with them. Were they different from usual? Stiffer, maybe, or awkward in some way I didn't pick up on? I'd been so focused on my own problems, I hadn't been paying attention to *them* at all. *This is exactly why I—*

Clap!

"Whaugh?!" I yelped as a sort of smacking sound rang out in front of me. I jerked my head up to find Koganezaki standing there, her palms held together, staring right at me. "K-Koganezaki...?"

"Stop that."

"Uh...what?"

"Staring at the ground. Blaming yourself. You'll lose sight of everything that way—even the things that are right in front of you," Koganezaki said, her exasperation more profound than ever, then heaved a deep sigh.

"S-Sorry," I weakly apologized.

"No... I was sighing at myself this time. I thought that since I'd noticed all these things, it was my responsibility to tell you about them, but now that I have, I'm starting to wonder if that was really the right choice, or if I went about telling you in the wrong way... Maybe all I've done is put you in a difficult position for no reason," Koganezaki quietly muttered. She seemed to sink into

her thoughts, almost brooding for a moment...but then she noticed that I was staring and put on a slightly bitter smile. "Relationships. They're never easy, are they?" she commented.

"Yeah... I guess not," I said. I was amazed to see that even someone as sensible as her worried about that sort of thing.

I was seriously underleveled when it came to interpersonal relationships. Just about everything about them felt like an insurmountable problem to me, and just thinking about it all was enough to make my head spin. Even when I *thought* I had something all figured out, I always knew in the back of my mind that I might've just gone with a convenient assumption that I *wanted* to be true, and that I might've been *totally* off the mark as far as the other person was concerned. It could happen with the girlfriends I'd recently made, with the little sisters I'd watched over for their whole lives, with the childhood friend I'd recently reconnected with...*anyone*, really. All it'd take was one little misapprehension and I'd be making mistakes all over the place.

"I know I'm giving a lot of unsolicited advice here," Koganezaki said, "but there's just one more thing I wanted to say: it's natural for relationships to change sometimes."

I blinked. "Huh...?"

"When you and your little sisters weren't getting along recently, you approached the problem with the goal of maintaining your sisterly relationship with them—and in the end, you succeeded. That said, interpersonal relationships are fluid by nature. Think about Momose and Aiba. They used to be your friends, but now, they're your girlfriends. And think about me. We used to be strangers, and now we're, well...friends."

"Friends!!!"

"I'd *really* prefer if you would play down your excitement a little. I'm starting to feel embarrassed now."

Wait, do you mean you're embarrassed to admit that we're friends, or embarrassed by the fact that we're friends?!

Yotsuba concluded that either answer would just make her depressed, and decided not to press the issue!

“Anyway, that’s enough about me,” said Koganezaki. “All that I’m trying to say is that while you consider Maki Amagi—or rather, while you consider Miss Oda to be ‘just a childhood friend’ of yours, it’s entirely possible that your relationship with her will change eventually, in one way or another.”

“I mean, I kinda get that. Makina and I really *don’t* feel like super great childhood-friend material for each other, do we...?”

“Do you think? In my opinion, idols and idiots pair together quite nicely,” Koganezaki said in such a perfect deadpan I couldn’t even begin to guess whether she was kidding or not. “And it’s also possible this situation could proceed in a *wildly* different direction than you’re expecting.”

“Like how?”

“For instance, your relationship with her could transcend childhood friendship in much the same way everyone likes to think the Sacrosanct’s has.”

Wait, does she mean, like...me and Makina might end up going out for real?!
“N-No way! That’s *definitely* not happening! I mean, Makina’s an idol, and this is just a pretend date! And I’m already spoken for, and I already told her that too...”

“But none of those factors rule it out absolutely, do they? It’s not unheard of for total unknowns to marry idols, and it’s entirely possible that in *her* eyes, this date isn’t an act at all. Not to mention that affairs are far from uncommon, even when one participant is married and the other is fully aware of that fact. The fact that you’re ‘spoken for’ doesn’t guarantee she couldn’t be aiming for something along those lines, in my view.”

“I...I *guess* that makes sense...?”

“Of course, considering that you’re already a two-timer, you’re not exactly in any position to criticize regardless of her intentions.”

“Ugh!” *She sure didn’t sugarcoat that one! Ouch!* She was also telling the truth, though, so I couldn’t exactly blame her for it.

“Though, considering *my* position,” Koganezaki continued, “my life would be much easier without irregular elements like her coming into the picture to disrupt your relationship with the Sacrosanct.”

“So, uh...what are you actually hoping for, in the end?” I asked.

“I’m not. How this ends is entirely your decision to make,” said Koganezaki. “I just think that if you’d decided to run from it, justifying the choice by saying you were running away for someone else’s sake, you’d have only ended up regretting it in the end.”

That, as best as I could tell, was Koganezaki’s way of saying that deferring to Yuna and Rinka’s unstated desires and leaving Makina to fend for herself would’ve been a bad decision...probably. That still left me at a loss, though. *What am I supposed to do...? I feel more lost than I did before this conversation started!*

“I’m sure you’ll manage to pull through somehow,” said Koganezaki.

“You are? Really?!”

“Knowing you, it’s only a matter of time before some outlandish miracle I never could’ve possibly imagined wraps the whole thing up perfectly.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring, you know...?”

“Who knows? Maybe you’ll even throw reason to the curb and try three-timing them all at once.”

“You’re just making fun of me now, aren’t you?!” *Just look at that grin on her face! I’ve never seen her smile like that before!* Not only did my protests not seem to dissuade her, she’d actually started smirking more obviously than ever!

“Vacations *do* have a way of bringing out people’s playful sides,” said Koganezaki. “And it seems *I’ve* taken quite a liking to the faces you make when you’re put on the spot.”

“I think we’d both be better off if you kept that preference buried, thanks!”

“And here I was, thinking I’d found my fetish.”

“That makes it *so much worse!*”

That's how I discovered a new side to Koganezaki's personality and came out of the conversation way more confused and with way more questions than I'd had going in. I *had* also learned plenty of things, to be fair, but if there was a perfect solution to the situation I'd found myself in, it was still a complete mystery to me.

One thing's for sure, though: if Emma's an angel, then Koganezaki's definitely a devil!

Chapter 4: Makina's True Intentions

"Are you all right, Yotsy?"

"Yeah, I'm okay! I think I just thought too much and burned my brain out a little..."

I ended up slumped listlessly on a bench, with Makina close at hand to fret over me. Koganezaki and Emma had already headed home. It seemed that Koganezaki had an annual pass to the aquarium as well, and the two of them had only come to see the dolphin show today. Something about that just felt so, I dunno...so *liberated* that I was actually a little jealous.

"Let's take the chance to rest up a little, then," said Makina. "I'm kind of tired too! It's surprising how much walking around you do at aquariums, huh?"

"Yeah... Still, though, sorry for making you wait up for me," I said.

"Of course I would! We're on a date, aren't we?"

Hearing the word *date* made my heart do a somersault. How serious was Makina being when she used it? I really had no idea, at this point.

"Did that girl...Koganezaki, was it? Did she say something to you?" asked Makina.

"Huh?" I grunted.

"She's your *friend*, right?" Makina continued. "I didn't get the sense she was your girlfriend, but I guess you never know..."

"Sh-She's a friend, yeah! Koganezaki's just a friend!" I yelped. We'd been on track toward a *very* dangerous misunderstanding for a second there, and I dispelled it as quickly as possible.

"Yeah, I figured!" Makina said without hesitation. Apparently, she hadn't been serious about it after all.

"We were just making small talk, that's all," I continued. "Y'know, 'Wow, I can't believe we ran into each other *here*, what a coincidence,' and stuff like

that!"

"Oh. I see," Makina said, then rested her chin in her hand and sank into thought.

I sorta just sat there and stared at her. *I wonder what she's thinking right now? Actually, not just right now. I wonder what she's been thinking this whole time, ever since she showed up at my house...*

"Hmm..."

"Y-Yotsy?"

"HMMMMMMMMMM..."

"Y-Yotsy, I'm talking to you!"

"Bwuh?!" I grunted as I realized I'd gotten so absorbed in staring at Makina, I'd leaned forward until my nose was practically pressed up against hers. Makina's excessively pretty face was flushed red, and I jerked backward with all my might, lacking the words to even excuse myself. *Okay...that was definitely not the right level of personal space for a couple of childhood friends!*

"Honestly, don't stare at me like that! You're making me nervous," said Makina.

U-Ugh... She looks so cute when she's embarrassed! And now I'm getting all weird about it thanks to the note Koganezaki ended our conversation on! "N-Nervous? You've gotta be kidding! You must be used to having all sorts of people stare at you, right?" I said, painfully aware of how bad of an excuse it was. Still, though...

"Well, not from *that* close up. I bet you could see every one of my pores from that distance."

"Agh!"

...I was sent reeling by her totally untelegraphed counterstrike...

"And besides...getting stared at by *you* makes me more nervous than getting stared at by anyone else..."

"Ugah?!"

...then blasted across the room by the full-on body blow that followed! She was so cute, my heart *actually* skipped a beat! One heartbeat, missing in action!!!

“B-But I’m nothing more than a mere water flea in your presence... Nay, a scrap of garbage left cast by the wayside, unworthy of your eminent nervousness...” I babbled.

“It feels like you’re drifting away from me here, emotionally *and* temporally. What era was that speech pattern supposed to be from?”

Talk about a comeback I can’t argue with!

“Really, Yotsy. You’re just making fun of me now, aren’t you?” Makina huffed.

“N-No way, not at all!” *Also aaah, too close too close too close!!!* Makina had drawn really, *really* close now, and all *sorts* of alarm bells were blaring in my mind! I know it was a little—no, make that a *lot* too late to notice this, but I was *finally* coming to an appreciation of the fact that Makina was an idol and I was a perfectly average middle-class rando. She was a *completely* different sort of life-form who lived in a *completely* different dimension, and it was only at that exact moment that I realized how overpoweringly brilliant her aura truly was!

Okay, Koganezaki, come on! You can’t seriously think that Makina could be in love with me, right?! It’s totally impossible! It’d be like a human falling in love with a frog! My heart was pounding like a war drum. She had my attention one hundred percent monopolized! *Koganezaki talked about how relationships changing was natural and stuff, but if ours changed like that, I don’t think I’d live through it!*

We were childhood friends, sure, but when I really thought about it, that was the only factor that tied the *current* Makina and me together. If I put the slightest distance between us, she’d leave me in the dust at the speed of light, and if I got any closer to her, her presence would crush me with ease. I was *glad* that I’d finally been reunited with her, though! I didn’t want to be estranged from her, and I also didn’t want to be vaporized into pure energy by her sheer glory!

That’s right—staying childhood friends is the best option! That’ll mean that Yuna and Rinka can rest easy too...not that I’m using them as an excuse or

anything! That'd be super crappy of me!

With that decided, there was only one thing left for me to do! I had to use this date as a chance to reinforce our bonds of childhood friendship, and I knew just how to do it!

“All right! That settles it!” I shouted as I shot to my feet.

“Wait, what?” said Makina.

“Let’s go!”

“Huh?! What?! Go where?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? We’re going to...a surprise!!!” I said, then sprinted off, paying no mind to Makina’s bewilderment...but significantly more mind to the aquarium staff, who chewed me out and brought my pace down to a healthy power walk.



The Ocean’s Woodland Aquarium was split up into three major areas. The first area that we’d visited was themed around the seas surrounding Japan, and the stadium where the dolphin show took place was the second. We’d just walked through the final area, which was designed to introduce visitors to undersea animals from other parts of the world. I’d looked at the floor map in advance and had decided to lead Makina around that zone in the opposite of the recommended order, for the sake of bringing us to a certain exhibit last. Now that we were drawing close to the dolphin-show area again, it was just about time for us to encounter it.

“Ah!” I exclaimed. “Look, look!”

“Huh...?” Makina said. “The ‘marine mammal corner’...?”

That’s right: this was the section of the aquarium dedicated to marine mammals! I know saying it that way makes them sound really hardcore, like they’re carrying guns and saluting and stuff, but the truth is, the marine mammal category includes some of every aquarium’s most popular residents. Chief among those: the penguins! This particular aquarium’s penguin exhibit was really popular, and even had a sort of petting-zoo setup going! A bunch of

families were lined up with their kids, waiting for a chance to touch a penguin. *That's the rightful rulers of the aquarium for you—no wonder they call them emperors!*

I wasn't taking Makina to see the penguins, though. Instead, I brought her to an exhibit just off to the side of them. "Look, there they are! See? Doesn't this take you back?" I said as I pointed at the exhibit. It was tucked into a corner of the area and barely anyone was looking at it, but the seals beyond the glass pane didn't seem bothered by their unpopularity at all and just lazed about, sunbathing their sealy hearts out.

"Seals...?" said Makina with a skeptical cock of her head. She clearly had no idea why I looked so satisfied with myself.

"Remember how the last time we came here, you'd really wanted to go to the zoo instead?" I asked.

"A-Are we really dragging that topic up again? Reliving that once was embarrassing enough," Makina grumbled.

"Ha ha ha, my bad! But really, though—do you remember how that turned out in the end?"

"What do you mean, how it turned out?" asked Makina, which was more or less enough to tell me that she did not, in fact, remember.

"I wanted to do something that'd make your day," I said. "I mean, I already had a feeling that you'd gotten really absorbed in the aquarium, but I wanted to make you even happier...so I took you to see the seals."

I was using my imagination to fill in the gaps in my memory a little—I didn't *perfectly* recall what exactly I'd done, or why I'd done it—but still, telling Makina the story made me feel like I was right back in that moment, seeing it all again with my own eyes. The two of us had stood before the seal enclosure back then, just like we were today, and I'd told her something:

"Look, see? It's like we're at the zoo!"

I'd thought it was a great idea. A stroke of genius, even. After all, zoos had seals too! That meant that if you were at a seal enclosure, you were basically at an aquarium *and* a zoo at the same time!

“But you know what happened next, Makina? You started crying.”

I’d forgotten that it wasn’t *just* about the zoo for Makina. It was her birthday, and she’d had plans to go there with her parents. She’d ended up with *me* to fill the gap they’d left after they had to run off and do their jobs...and I’d gone and brought all those feelings back to the surface again.

“They promised, but they left me alone anyway... Maybe mommy and daddy hate me?” Makina had said, squatting down and curling up into a ball before the seal enclosure.

That was all it took to send the old me into a blind panic. I wanted to do something, anything, to make her stop crying...and in the heat of the moment, I went and hugged her with all my strength!

“They don’t hate you!” I’d shouted. *“There’s no way they hate you, Makimaki!”*

“But...”

“My dad told me all about this! He said that he goes to work because he has to, to take care of me! Your mom and dad are doing it for you too, I’m sure of it!”

I was desperate to console her. I just wanted her tears to dry, that was all. I wanted to see the sadness fade from her face, even if only for a second. It was her birthday, after all. Seeing my friend cry on her birthday was, well...I just didn’t like it.

“And you know what? I’ll be your birthday present!” I’d declared.

“Huh...?”

“I know it’s not good enough to make up for your mom and dad not being here, but still! I’ll stay with you! We’ll be together all day today! I’ll be your bestest friend from now on, I promise!”

I might be misremembering the details a little. I’m pretty sure that’s more or less what I said back then, but it was so long ago and I was in such a state at the time that I doubt I’m getting it right word for word. But regardless...

“You’ll stay with me...?” Makina had repeated. Just as I’d hoped, her tears

began to dry. *That*, I remember very well. “*Really? You promise? You’ll stay with me forever?*”

“*Yeah! We’ll be together forever!*”

Looking back on it, I was struck by just how little “forever” means when it’s coming out of the mouth of a kindergartener. At the time, though, it had felt like it carried some sort of magic—like it *really* meant forever and ever—and I’m sure that Makina felt that way too.

“*Forever? Even longer than mommy and daddy?*” Makina had asked.

“*Yeah!*” I agreed, even though I didn’t *really* understand what that even meant. I was so happy that she wasn’t crying anymore, I would’ve said just about anything in that moment.

“Hee hee!” I chuckled. “I’d rather not think much about the sort of kid I was back then, but *you* were as cute as a button, Makina!” I said as I lingered in the memory.

“O-Oh, come *on*, Yotsy!” Makina protested with a vivid blush.

D’aww, look at her! She’s so embarrassed!

This was what I’d been aiming for: an old story that Makina and I shared, and that nobody else knew about. *This* was the firm, undeniable proof I was her childhood friend that I’d been searching for! I hadn’t made friends with her because she was an idol. I’d liked her since way before then... Well, I mean, I *did* forget her at one point, but that didn’t mean I’d stopped liking her! It wasn’t like we got in a fight or anything!

“You remember this place, right, Makina? I bet it’s all coming back to you now,” I said, shaking off the bout of gloom I could feel sneaking up on me before it could take hold and passing the conversation’s initiative over to her.

“Hmph,” Makina pouted. “Of *course* I do. How could I not remember after a description like that? I don’t even know what to say about the sort of kid I was back then, though... I know I was *just* a kid, but still, I was pathetic.”

“That’s not true at all!” I said. “If I’d been in your shoes back then, I bet I would’ve thrown a crying, screaming tantrum!”

“But if you had, I wouldn’t have been able to comfort you at all. I probably would’ve just ended up crying along with you. I was always so jealous of how kind and driven you were back then,” said Makina. Her eyes were turned toward the seals, but it didn’t exactly feel like she was looking at them. She was gazing far off into the distance—almost like she was gazing at our past selves.

“And *anyway*, Yotsy!” Makina exclaimed, whirling around to face me.

“Hyeek?!” I shrieked.

“If you remember all *that* stuff, then you *must* remember what happened after that too, right?!”

“Wait, *what* happened after that?”

“We made a promise!”

“A promise...?” *Come to think of it, she said something about a promise back when we first reunited, didn’t she?* I’d had an inkling that she *hadn’t* meant the one about her becoming an idol, judging by her reaction back then, but I certainly hadn’t expected that topic to make a reappearance here! “Like, some sort of promise we made right after...?”

I had no idea. I was drawing such a blank, part of me was starting to wonder if I’d blacked out and *nothing* had happened past that point! But something didn’t seem right about that gap in my memory. Just looking at the seals with Makina and talking about my other memories had been enough to bring *them* flooding back. The difference, if I had to guess, was that I hadn’t been *concerned* about the whole remembering thing, at that point. It was only when Makina asked me about what had happened next and I freaked out that it all vanished into a blur again, I guess? I had to wonder why my mind worked that way...but of course, none of this changed the fact that I didn’t remember, plain and simple.

“Uhhh,” I grunted as I racked my mind.

“You really can’t remember, huh?” said Makina.

“Ugh! Sorry...”

“It’s all right! If you can’t remember, then, well...we’ll just have to see about jogging your memory! I have a bunch of ideas!”

“Huh?”

Before I could ask what she meant by that, I was overwhelmed by the strong, penetrating fragrance of flowers. *Wait...huh? What is she—?!*

“M-M-Makinaaaaaa?!”

“There! Now it’s just like back then, right?”

What is happening?! I mean, okay, it’s kinda obvious! She hugged me out of nowhere! But why?!

“They say that when you’re trying to remember something, it helps to retrace your steps and do the same things you did back then, right? That’s why you brought me to see the seals, isn’t it?”

“Uhh...er...”

“*You* were the one who hugged *me* back then, of course...but let’s just not focus on that part, okay?”

“I, er, dunno about that,” I said hesitantly. I know she didn’t *really* mean it literally, but the fewer distractions I had to focus on, the more my focus would naturally turn to her presence. That’s kinda just how hugs work! I’d focus on her scent. Her heat. The soft touch of her hair. The sensation of her breath on my skin.

“I can feel you so clearly, Yotsy. I can even feel your heart beating,” Makina whispered, almost as if she was reading my thoughts, then squeezed me harder than ever.

“M-Makina,” I said. “We’re in public, you know? *Anyone* could be watching right now!”

“Nobody’s watching us. Everyone’s so preoccupied with the penguins, they’ll never notice us at all. Well...except for the seals, I guess.”

I didn’t know whether it heard us or whether it was just a coincidence, but at that precise moment, one of the seals let out a big, ridiculous-looking yawn. In any case, I had a feeling that even if people *were* watching us, Makina still wouldn’t let go. I just got that sense, somehow.

“See, Yotsy? It’s just like back then. Is this bringing back any memories?”

“Eeep...”

“I remember like it was yesterday.”



Sorry, but I still don't remember even the teeniest, tiniest little bit... And anyway, this isn't even remotely close to how things happened back then, is it?! Makina wasn't crying at all this time! In fact, she was smiling, and in a weirdly seductive sort of way to boot! And then she sniffed me!

"Ahh... I love the way you smell, Yotsy," Makina muttered.

"Love"?! Wait, no, it's fine—she was just talking about my scent. Though I'm pretty sure that if I smell like anything, it's the consumer-grade fabric softener my family uses!

Makina definitely seemed to be in *some* sort of weird mood. She kept hugging me harder and harder, and I had a feeling that at the rate things were going, either my heart would explode or my spine would snap before I remembered anything!

"M-Makina?" I said.

"Mmhhh...fluffy-floofy..."

What part of me is fluffy or floofy, exactly?! She was lavishing me with so much affection, it felt like she was treating me like a cute little puppy. She rubbed her cheek against me, stroked my back, and held me as close as possible. It was enough to make me start questioning a few things, to say the least.

I-Is this how childhood friends treat each other? I-I mean, we are childhood friends, so it's gotta be, right? Yeah, this must just be how relationships like that work! No matter what anyone says, the two of us are childhood friends to the end...probably!

However desperately I tried to convince myself that everything was fine and normal, it felt like the situation might swallow me up at any moment. I was drowning in it. Makina's ever-sparkling idol aura was dragging me to a watery grave!

"Thank you so much for coming, everyooone!"

Huh?! What?! A voice in my head?!

"Welcome, one and all, to Yotsuba Hazama's very first live show!"

Wait, is that me?! Me as a pop idol?! Yotsuba, no! Stop! You can't use your real name as your stage name, it's too risky...wait, that is not the problem!

It was Makina's idol aura at work. It had engulfed me, and being engulfed in an idol aura had made my ego go all, "Oh, huh. I guess that means I'm an idol too now?" apparently!

"Hey, do you wanna know a secret, everyone? The truth is, I'm childhood friends with the Maki Amagi!"

Nooo! Stop name-dropping Makina to move up in the industry!

"Okay, listen up! I'll be singing my debut single, 'I Love...uhh...?'"

Aaah, and now my vocabulary sucks too much to think up a decent title! But that's okay, because this is not the time for this anyway!!!

"M-Makinaaaa," I awkwardly muttered.

"Well? Are you remembering anything?" Makina asked.

"No, and this is gonna start giving me some weird ideas if we keep it up for much longer..."

"Oh? Well, what's wrong with that? Have aaall the weird ideas you want! I don't mind a bit!"

"Please stop making this worse," I moaned. I felt bad for not playing along with her good-natured teasing, but this was one idea that was better off abandoned before it could fully form, and I knew for a fact that letting it form wouldn't help me remember my forgotten promise at all...well, probably not, anyway.

"Hmm. I guess hugging's not going to do the trick, then," said Makina.

"G-Guess not," I agreed.

"In that case... I'll just have to give you a helpful hint!" said Makina, releasing me from her hug but clasping my left hand between hers just a moment later.

"Is it just me, or are you actually *enjoying* this?" I commented.

"Back then, on my birthday, I was so happy to hear you say that you'd stay with me forever...I ended up opening up to you about something I'd been

keeping secret ever since we first met.”

“U-Uhh...Makina?” I said nervously.

Makina lifted my hand, raising it slowly up toward her, leaned forward...and pressed her lips to the base of my ring finger. I let out a strangled gasp.

“Hee hee! I guess I might be doing it a little bit out of order,” Makina chuckled with a bashful smile. And as she did, I felt like I could see the old her—the young her—making that very same expression.

“You’ll stay with me...?” the young Makina said. Her voice echoed clearly in my mind. *“Really? You promise? You’ll stay with me forever?”*

“Yeah! We’ll be together forever!”

“Forever? Even longer than mommy and daddy?”

“Yeah!”

That much, I’d already remembered. Now, though, I finally recalled what had come next.

“In that case...Yotsy?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s get married!”

“Huh?”

That’s right. She asked me to marry her... Back then, though, I hadn’t really understood what marriage even was.

“I read about it in a picture book,” Makina had said. *“When two people love each other, that means they can get married! And that means they can kiss, and, umm...and be family with each other!”*

“They kiss? And be family...?”

Kissing was still a total unknown to me, but *family* was a concept I was familiar with. Family meant my mom and my dad. It meant Sakura and Aoi. It meant the people who were always with me, who would smile and laugh with me like it was the most natural thing in the world...and when I thought about it that way, Makina felt like she was one of those people. And so, I nodded

without hesitation.

“Okay! Let’s do it!”

“Really? Hooray!” Makina had exclaimed, her face lit up as bright as could be. Then she took my left hand in hers. *“They did it like this in the picture book!”* she’d said, then kissed my finger.

It was just a single scene in a picture book. A fairy tale, translated into Japanese from who even knows what language. We didn’t know what kissing meant, and we didn’t know the significance of one’s ring finger...but still, we took the whole procedure so seriously it was almost laughable, staging our own little wedding ceremony.

Wait... Could that be the promise? Is Makina saying that she’s been holding on to a promise we made to get married when we were in kindergarten, before we even understood what it meant?!

I don’t think anyone would’ve taken us seriously back then. My dad had been our chaperone, and he’d probably heard the whole exchange and just waved it off. But she *had* been serious. Even without understanding what she was doing, even if nobody else would be. And I...got the distinct sense that somebody was staring at me?

“Gyaaah?!” I shrieked. *Who is that little girl and why’s she looking at us like that?!* Before I knew it, a girl—probably early elementary school-aged or so—had come over and started staring *right at us!* She must’ve wandered over after getting bored of the penguins!

A moment of silence passed. She stared. I stared.

Ahhh! She’s opening her mouth! She’s definitely about to call her mom over! I have seconds before that kid says something like “Mommy, what are those weird girls doing?” and I—

“It’s Maki!”

Makina and I gasped. *O-Oh, so that’s how this is happening! Okay!!!*

It seemed that, in her haste to hug me, Makina’s hat had fallen off her head. That took half of her disguise out of commission, and her fake glasses just

weren't enough to conceal her idol aura on their own! I broke out in a cold sweat, and I could tell that Makina had too. The little girl who'd called her name wasn't *really* a problem. The *real* problem was what came next...

"Huh? Is that *the* Maki?!"

"It is! It's Maki Amagi!"

"Are they filming something here?"

"But wait, I thought she was supposed to be on a hiatus or something?"

O-O-O-Oh god, what should we do?! The girl's shout had drawn the attention of the *whole* penguin crowd, and now they were all gathering up around us! The commotion was sure to just get bigger and bigger, until—

Splooooooooosh!!!

"Huh?!"

"What the—?!"

Suddenly, an enormous splashing sound rang out. It sounded like someone had dropped a boulder into a swimming pool, and for just a moment, everyone's attention was torn away from us. My attention was drawn as well, and when I turned to look, I saw a seal, drifting leisurely through the water...?

Wait a second. I thought that seal was rolling around on the ground just a second ago... W-Wait, no way?! D-Don't tell me...it was trying to cover for us?! It dove into the water to distract everyone?!

"Yotsy!" Makina shouted. She must have picked up on the seal's scheme faster than anyone, because she grabbed my hand, dragging me with her as she fled the scene. Given how famous she was, it felt like it was only a matter of time before the news spread throughout the whole facility, of course, so we decided to leave the aquarium as quickly as possible.



"Haaah...haaah..."

"Are you okay, Yotsy?!"

"Y-Yeah... I'm f-fine, really... Just not a big runner, that's all..."

We'd put the aquarium behind us and sprinted off toward the station as quickly as we could...for *maybe* a minute or two, after which I'd hit the limit of my endurance like a brick wall. I felt especially pathetic considering that Makina wasn't even out of breath, though on second thought, her job was all about singing while she danced and dancing while she sang, day after day. It was probably a given that she'd built up a lot of endurance over the course of that, and at this point, it was also a given that my own endurance was atrocious.

"Sorry, Yotsy. This was all my fault," said Makina.

"N-No, it's not! You're a celebrity, so these things just happen! It's fine!" I said. Considering what a commotion had been caused by one person identifying her, I could only imagine how many unpleasant and inconvenient experiences she'd been through up until now. "Anyway, you didn't get hurt while we were getting away or anything, did you?!"

"No, I'm all right. That splash came at the perfect time to make an opening before things got out of hand... Are you sure *you're* okay, though?"

"Yup! I'm A-okay! I don't draw attention like you do in the first place, so no issues!"

"Oh?" said Makina. "I'm not so sure about that. I think you got plenty of attention back there."

"Huh?! From who?!" I gasped. Compared to Makina, I was just some faceless extra in the background—actually, I might as well have been part of the background itself! *Who the heck would pay attention to someone like me, and what's wrong with their priorities?*

"From me, of course!" said Makina.

"Of course?!"

"Hee hee hee!" Makina giggled. "I love it when you panic like that, Yotsy. It makes me want to tease you even more," she said with an alluring smile.

I *knew* that was just part of the joke, but it still sent shivers down my spine. *We're childhood friends... We're just childhood friends!* I repeated over and over in my mind. With each repetition, though, some part of me started wondering more and more: How *are* childhood friends supposed to act around each other,

anyway?!

The only pair of childhood friends I knew were Yuna and Rinka, and the two of them were incredibly close. They were always together, always perfectly in sync, always sharing in each and every one of each other's little joys and hardships...or, well, something like that, at least. Makina and I weren't quite like the two of them, of course. *We* hadn't spent the vast majority of our lives at each other's sides, thanks to the gap in our shared history, but she *was* still the only childhood friend I had, and I did still want to maintain and even strengthen that connection, little by little. That was why I'd brought her to see the seals—I'd thought the nostalgia would bring us just a little closer to the friendship we'd shared back in the day. And yet...

"Let's get married!"

As it turned out, not even the one experience of childhood friendship I had to use as an example seemed *quite* right. In retrospect, I had to wonder whether my desire to stay childhood friends with her was what had kept me from remembering that part of the exchange, on some sort of subconscious level. *Are you still serious about all this, Makina? Even now...?*

Normally, that kind of story would be the sort of thing that people mention to liven up a conversation or to tease you. It would be something that had happened in the past, and *stayed* in the past. Things seemed a little different here, though. For one thing, Makina had seemed invested in me remembering our promise on my own—just as invested as I was, really. And for another, there was the matter of our *other* promise...Makina's promise to become an idol. For all its absurdity, she'd actually gone and kept that one. Could that be a sign of just how important those promises still felt to her? Did it mean that she still wanted to marry me? *Well, no, that's just not feasible...but could it mean that Koganezaki was right, and she really has feelings for me in that sort of way?*

My heart felt like it was beating its way out of my chest. I knew that I might've been misunderstanding all this. Actually, I *hoped* I was misunderstanding it. But if I wasn't...if Makina really did love me...then just what the *heck* was I supposed to do about it?!

Wait, why is that even a question?! I already have girlfriends! Two of them, even!!!

“Who knows? Maybe you’ll even throw reason to the curb and try three-timing them all at once.”

Aaagh! Don’t tempt me, Koganezaki, you devil! That’s out of the question! I know I’ve done some pretty wild things in the past, but not even I’d be crazy enough to go down that road!

“Yotsy?”

“Fwaugh?!”

“Oh, you finally reacted! I’ve been trying to get your attention for a while now, you know?”

“Er, uh...sorry,” I muttered.

We were walking along a lengthy stretch of road that led from the aquarium to the station. We’d escaped from Makina’s fans and had slowed our pace to a stroll, but her grip on my hand was as firm as ever. I was actually pretty sure we’d spent more time holding hands than not that day, but it was only now that I finally started reading into the action.

“What should we do for the rest of today?” asked Makina. “There’s not much time left till evening, but it feels a little early to just go home now.”

“Y-Yeah, true enough,” I stammered.

Honestly, my mental state was such a disaster zone that I didn’t have the capacity to think about what came next at all...but on the other hand, I knew that if I didn’t bring this to a resolution now, I’d just end up brooding over it until I did. I wanted to understand Makina’s true motives, even if only a little, and even if she was after something that I *didn’t* want at all.

“Where could we go, though?” I finally said. “Somewhere cool would be sorta nice, I guess.” We’d been running around under the blazing hot sun, and the aquarium hadn’t been especially cool inside either. The heat was really starting to get to me, all around.

“In that case, I know the perfect place!” said Makina.

“Really?” I said, a little surprised.

“I looked into the shops in the area after we decided to come here, and I found a café that I wanted to visit with you if we had the time,” Makina explained.

“A café... Yeah, that sounds great!” I said. *That sounds like the perfect place for us to talk! Unless it’s really crowded, I guess. Then we’d risk Makina’s identity getting exposed...*

“Hee hee!” Makina giggled. “Don’t worry—I probably know what you’re thinking, and it won’t be an issue!”

Makina ended up bringing me to a small café with a sorta modern vibe, just about five minutes away. They were playing jazz inside, and while there were a few other customers, they were all relaxing and minding their own business. It felt like the sort of place that adults would frequent, which made me a little nervous, in an excited sort of way.

“Welcome,” said a waiter. “Table for two?”

“Yes, please,” said Makina, who seemed very used to this. “Is there room available upstairs?”

“Yes, certainly. Right this way, please,” said the waiter, who led us up to the second floor.

“Oh, huh,” I muttered as we reached the top of the staircase.

“They have private rooms set up on the second floor,” Makina explained. “It’s the perfect place to have a conversation you’d rather not let anyone eavesdrop on!”

As we quietly chatted, the waiter ushered us into one of the private rooms. It sort of reminded me of a karaoke box—not huge or anything, but still roomy enough to relax in.

“I’ve never been to a café with private rooms before,” I said.

“Isn’t it neat?” said Makina. “Apparently this place’s owner loves keeping things novel, and has experimented with all sorts of new ideas using this café. Not that I’d know, of course! I’m just quoting that from their website.”

The room had a tablet in it, which we could apparently use to place our order. That wasn't new to me—it was getting more and more common to see systems like that in chain restaurants—but it *did* strike me as unusual to see that sort of thing in a privately owned business.

“Apparently people have asked to use this place to attend online meetings and do remote work too,” Makina continued.

“Oh, wow,” I commented. It wasn't like I'd never *heard* those terms before, but I'd sure never had many chances to use them myself. All this stuff felt like it was giving me a peek into the adult world, and I was getting pretty excited.

“What do you want to order, Yotsy? Don't worry about the prices! This'll be my treat.”

“Huh? You don't have to do that, I can pay for my own...*gah?! O-Oh, jeez, that's expensive! A single cup of black coffee costs that much?! That's not the sort of money a high schooler can get a hold of that easily!*”

“Hee hee! Like I said, I'll cover it,” Makina giggled.

“Sorry,” I sighed. “I'll have an iced tea, then.”

“All right!”

Before long, my iced tea and Makina's iced café au lait arrived. We could finally sit back and relax...but not for long. It was finally time for the *real* conversation to begin.

“Hey, Makina?” I said.

“Yes?”

“About, umm...about the promise we were talking about earlier,” I began. I'd decided to bring it up myself, before anything else, because I knew for a fact that if I let that opportunity pass me by, I'd just keep doing so until I'd totally run out of chances. Plus, the fact that I was pretty sure that Makina had brought me here to talk about all this stuff gave me a little dose of extra confidence to go through with it.

“Let me guess. You remembered, didn't you?” said Makina with a perfectly sweet, innocent grin.

My heart skipped a beat once more. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt now that we'd remembered the same thing, and that in her mind, our promise wasn't just a thing of the past.

"You know, when I moved away and we were separated, that promise we made with each other was what kept me going," Makina said, looking me straight in the eye as she spoke. That was a *really* heavy note for her to start on, and my pulse began to accelerate as she went on. "My parents' relationship was already starting to fall apart back then. I was just a kindergartener, and even *I* could tell that the three of us wouldn't be a family forever."

The story Makina told me defied my wildest expectations. It seemed that Makina was the only reason her parents hadn't decided to get a divorce. I don't mean that in the sense that they did it out of love for her, though—they chose to stay together until she graduated from high school out of a sense of *responsibility*. And so, when Makina told them that she wanted to be an idol, in a certain sense it had worked out perfectly for everyone involved.

"They didn't have to bother with taking care of me when I was off at my lessons, after all. And even if they thought I was chasing the impossible, I'm sure that helping me work toward my dream let them feel a little less guilty about the situation," said Makina.

"Makina..."

"Oh, please, stop frowning at me like that! It would've been way harder for me to make good on my promise if it hadn't turned out that way, so it all worked out in the end."

I knew for a fact that if I'd been through what she had—if my family had split apart like hers had—I wouldn't have been able to bear it. Makina had, though, because she'd had her promises to support her. Her promise with *me*.

"I thought that if I managed to become an idol and keep my promise, then who knows? Maybe our other promise would work out too, and the two of us could be a family. That thought meant the world to me."

Makina's talent had flourished in the blink of an eye. She could sing, she could dance, she could act, and she even had a natural stage presence and talent for conversation. As she grew older, her skills grew more and more polished. She

had everything that an idol could possibly need to move up in the world, and at the same time as she got into middle school, her idol group, Shooting Star, was formed. No sooner had they staged their first show than they were the talk of the industry, and their meteoric rise to the heights of popularity was soon to follow.

“That was around the time that my parents started looking at me in a new light. They used to fight about who would have to take custody of me after the divorce, but at that point, they started fighting about who would *get* to keep me instead.”

“You mean...?”

“In their eyes, I was a lot more valuable as Maki Amagi than Makina Oda had ever been, I guess.”

“But...that’s just *wrong*,” I said. Just listening to her story was making me so painfully sad, I could hardly stand it. The worst part was that Makina herself didn’t seem to think anything of it in particular. This was *her* tragedy, but she barely even looked like she cared. She’d learned how her parents felt, gone through all that pain, accepted it, and moved on...and through that whole extended process, she’d been alone, bearing everything without anyone to help her.

“I’ve actually had this hiatus planned for a long time now,” said Makina. “I talked it through with my agency ages ago. They tried to talk me out of it, of course, but people are starting to realize these days that having a decent academic record can expand the range of an idol’s work in the long term. There’s a lot of data to support that theory, at least, and I managed to use it to convince them.”

“But, like, if you only went out looking for that data *after* you decided you wanted to take a break, then expanding your range can’t have been your real goal, right?”

“Right. I wanted to be independent before my parents’ divorce went through,” Makina explained. “Thankfully, all the earnings from my idol work have been deposited into my personal savings account since the very start of my career. I’m sure my parents would’ve loved to get their hands on it, but they

could never bring themselves to bring up the subject of my money with me. I guess they thought it'd be crass, or their pride kept them from begging me for handouts, or something."

I remembered Makina's parents as being very hard workers. They'd both had jobs and seemed to prioritize their careers above all else. It almost felt like Makina had used that fact to her advantage, in a weird sort of way... Anyway, her story already had me feeling like my brains had been scrambled. *Like, seriously, she would've had to work out that bank-account stuff when she was in elementary school! How?!*

"Our old house went up for sale when I announced my hiatus, and I bought it and moved in right away. I had to pull a lot of strings and twist a lot of arms to make that happen, but in the end, it all went more or less just as planned."

"Uh..."

"Ah, sorry! This must be a total drag to listen to, huh?" said Makina, chuckling awkwardly as she realized just how taken aback by the sheer scale of her life story I was. "You know, you're the first person I've ever told about all this, Yotsy. It's not exactly a happy story, after all..."

"Th-That's fine, though! I'm glad you told me about it! I'm just frustrated that I couldn't do anything to help throughout all that," I exclaimed. Then again, while Makina had been living through all those trials, *I'd* only been thinking about myself. I'd been *jealous* of Maki Amagi, preoccupied to the point that I never even realized she was Makina, so maybe I didn't have any right to talk about wishing I could've helped.

"But you *did* help," Makina said as she leaned forward over the table and took my hand in hers. I gulped as she gazed deeply into my eyes. "I got through it all *because* of you, Yotsy! If I hadn't had my promise to you, I never would've managed."

"But I was in kindergarten when I made that promise! That was the *old* me!" I protested. "I wish we could go back to the way we were then, but...I'm not like how you remember me. I don't think I can live up to your expectations."

"Wrong. You're you, Yotsy, no matter what happens," said Makina with a shake of her head. "I knew it the second I saw you again. You look at me in a

way that nobody else ever has.”

O-Okay, maybe that’s true...but that’s probably just because I’m one of the only people in Japan who could look you in the eye and not realize that you’re Maki Amagi!

“You see all of me, Yotsy. You see me as Maki Amagi *and* Makina Oda. You don’t think about what you could get out of me—you just treat me like a friend, and stick around me for that friendship alone. Just like how you used to,” Makina said, then reached into her bag and pulled out a picture. It looked really old, but I could tell she’d taken very careful care of it.

“Ah... It’s us,” I said.

“That’s right. This picture’s been my good-luck charm for a long time now,” said Makina.

It was a picture of the two of us, wearing the little smocks that had served as our kindergarten uniforms. Makina had a wide-eyed look of surprise on her face and I was wrapping her up in a big bear hug...and when I really thought about it, I had a feeling that I owned a copy of that exact same picture as well.

“This is the only one I have that’s just of the two of us,” said Makina. “When things got hard, and when I felt like I couldn’t take it anymore, I’d look at it and think about you. That always gave me the courage I needed... Hee hee—you know, I brought this picture onstage with me for my first performance! It was in my pocket that whole time!”

“I-It was?” Well, that’s kinda embarrassing! And okay, seriously, just how inflated is Makina’s image of me?! How did I end up being some sort of guardian angel for one of the most popular idols in the country? My little sisters adored me (or so I liked to think), and even they would’ve dismissed a scenario like that as completely impossible!

“Hey, Yotsy...? I’m sorry,” said Makina.

“Huh? Why’re you *apologizing* now?!” I asked.

“Because...I lied to you.”

“You what?” *Huh? What’s she talking about? I’m totally clueless!* Makina had

a look on her face like a kid who knew that she was about to be scolded, though, so I knew that whatever she was talking about, she was probably serious about it.

“The truth is, I made up that whole story about being stalked by a reporter!” Makina shouted.

“Huh...?”

For a moment, I couldn’t even understand what she was talking about. *Oh, right...come to think of it, that was the whole reason why we ended up going out today, wasn’t it? She said that the media was convinced she was in a relationship with some actor, and that she had to go out on a date with me to clear away that suspicion.* I hadn’t *forgotten* about all that, of course! It just, you know...I wasn’t, like, *actively* thinking about it all the time either.

“I can’t rule out the possibility that somebody ended up following us around today, but if they did, it had nothing to do with the story I told you,” said Makina. “All that stuff about the actor I worked with? I made up every bit of it.”

Thinking back on the events of the day, the aquarium had been dimly lit enough that if someone had been sneaking photos of us, I would’ve noticed the flash for sure. That hadn’t happened at all, and Makina hadn’t seemed particularly preoccupied with the possibility that we were being followed either...probably, anyway.

“Oh, huh. I had no idea,” I said.

“I’m so sorry! I was planning on telling you the truth once the day was over, honestly! That doesn’t change the fact I lied to you, though...”

Makina gave me a deep, apologetic bow, and as I looked down at her, just one phrase sprang immediately to mind.

“Oh, thank *goodness*!” I sighed.

“Wha...*huh*?” grunted Makina.

I wasn’t, in fact, angry at all about her lying to me. Far from it—I was relieved.

“Well, that means that you’re not *really* being stalked at all, right? And that means that you can actually use your hiatus to relax, and won’t have trouble

concentrating on school... Basically, this means all *sorts* of good stuff!" I said. I'm sure I could've come up with some more concrete examples if I'd taken the time to really think it through, but I'd already spent too much of this conversation trapped in my own little mental maze and didn't want to risk plunging back into it. "Plus, all that stuff aside, I had a ton of fun today! This really took a load off my mind, somehow!"

"Ah..." Makina quietly gasped. *She* seemed totally bewildered, but *I'd* never felt better, emotionally speaking! I was in the *perfect* mood to enjoy my iced tea, adult-sized price tag and—

"I love you, Yotsy."

"Pffgwaugh?! *Wha—?!'*"

"Ah, sorry! That just slipped out!" Makina shouted, then started trying to wave it off in a flustered panic...but I could tell that, most likely, she'd been *totally* serious. Between Yuna, Rinka, Sakura, and Aoi, I'd had *four* people spill their feelings to me like that before, and while Makina hadn't been quite as straightforwardly aggressive as some of the others were, I could still tell from the heat and intensity that laced her words that she really meant it. I was an old hand at this by now! Trust me, I knew what I was talking about!

"Ugggh," Makina moaned, her face beet red and tears pooling in her eyes.

I had a feeling that she was *deeply* regretting what she'd just blurted out. I, on the other hand, had more or less suspected that this might be the case already, and—spit take aside—was handling it pretty well. I'd been prepared for this...*ugggh*, *but* still!

"But, Makina, I—" I began.

"I know," said Makina, cutting me off. "You're already dating someone else. I know."

"Yeah..."

"But that doesn't mean you're *married* or anything!"

"Whahuh?!" *Okay, this is not the reaction I was expecting!*

"You see situations like this all the time on TV, right? You'll have a character

who's been seeing the same person for years and years, only to dump them and get married to someone else in the end!"

"I mean, yeah, that's a plot device all right!"

"In other words, even if you *are* already dating someone, I still have a chance! And just think about it—I'm an idol! I'm *the* Maki Amagi, you know? I could bring home the bacon like you wouldn't *believe*! If you got together with me, you could live a life of luxury without ever having to work a day!"

I mean, yes, I'd bet she really is that rich...but holy crap, I can't believe this is actually turning out exactly how Koganezaki predicted it would!

Makina's eyes were shining with excited determination, and the smile on her face was brighter and more sincere than any of the other ones she'd given me since we were reunited. She'd let her feelings slip on accident, sure, but she'd completely turned the situation around and seized the initiative again!

"B-But, I mean...*marriage*?" I said. "We're both girls, so we couldn't get married no matter what happened, right?"

"Counterpoint: Holland, Belgium, Spain, Canada..."

"Uh?"

"There are already quite a few countries where same-sex marriage is legal, and more and more places are making it legal by the day! We just have to move to one of them, and it won't be a problem at all!"

"B-But what about your idol—"

"I have plenty of savings for us to live on, and I could easily keep earning an income uploading videos online! And even in the absolute worst-case scenario where that didn't work out, I'd just have to put my nose to the grindstone, get a new job, and support you that way! I'd make sure you'd never want for anything!"

Sh-She's so confident! And persuasive too! After all, she *was* a girl my age who'd managed to save up a preposterous sum of money on her own. I'm pretty sure I've heard someone important say that people with an abundance of talent in their chosen field have a way of excelling in other fields as well, if

they put their mind to it, so I was confident that Makina could do great in plenty of non-idol careers. *But, no! I already have Yuna and Rinka!*

“Oh, no need to rush,” said Makina. “I’m not asking you to give me an answer right away or anything!”

“Wait, no, that’s not really the—”

“Phew... I feel so much better now that this is all out in the open! Oh, wow, this café au lait’s *delicious!*”

Makina, nooo, you can’t just feel better and leave me hanging like this! This is no time to be savoring your coffee! We’d just gone from a *heavy* tale about her family history to the reveal that the paparazzi story had been a lie, then jumped straight into an all-out confession of love followed immediately by a *proposal*, for crying out loud! I’d been subjected to so much of an information overload since we arrived at the café, my brain wasn’t even close to finished processing it all! All I’d ever wanted was to help my old friend Makina with her problem...so what the *heck* was I supposed to do *now*?!

“Feel free to order another iced tea if you want, Yotsy! This is all on my tab, so you could even add a slice of cake if you wanted! I don’t mind!” said Makina. Her carefree smile told me that she really had been relieved of all her worries, and that was great for *her*, but...*but*...!

“G-Great... Guess I’ll order another, then... Hee hee...”

“Perfect!”

In the end, I made no progress whatsoever in figuring out what I should do. In fact, I pretty much gave up on thinking about it at all, and let myself be swept along with the flow as we enjoyed the rest of our date.

Interlude III: Makina Oda

“Maki!”

“Hmm...? Did you need something, Mio?”

Four years had passed by since I’d made my debut as Maki Amagi the idol. It was summer—the first one since I’d made it into high school—and I’d just wrapped up a practice session for a new song that was due to be announced soon. That’s when Mio Kuruma, another member of Shooting Star, called out to me.

Though, really...“called out to me” makes it sound a lot more benign than the situation actually felt. She grabbed me by the shoulder, hard enough that it hurt, her brow knitted and her glare sharp. It was an expression that our managers would never let the public see her make, full of such clear anger and hostility. It would’ve been sort of funny if she’d stopped me like *that* for a casual chat about the weather, but I didn’t have my hopes up.

“I heard you’re going on hiatus,” Mio said.

I knew it. It seemed the conversation was going to be exactly as much of a drag as I’d been anticipating. “Word travels fast,” I said.

“Why’d it have to *travel* at all? Why weren’t we the *first* people you talked to about this?!” Mio snapped. This was exactly the sort of emotional outburst her expression had led me to expect. Mio had always been blunt and impulsive, but it felt like that side of her had taken the reins even more than usual today.

Unfortunately—for her—I was already worn out from practice. Honestly, I just wanted to go home and study, *without* having to deal with her beforehand. “Can we talk about this some other time?” I asked.

“Can we... Are you *kidding* me?!” said Mio. “I mean, what the hell?! You should’ve come to us the *second* you started even *considering* taking a break!”

I almost let a sigh slip out, but I held it in at the last second. Considering how worked up she was, I had a feeling she’d probably have slapped me for it. *Of*

course, she definitely wouldn't be in the wrong, regardless.

Mio had joined up with our agency around the same time that I did. I was a complete amateur who'd more or less signed up on a whim, but she was different. She'd already been through all sorts of training in preparation for the endeavor. Her parents doted on her, and she seemed to enjoy each and every day even more than the last. She couldn't have cut a sharper contrast with someone like me, whose only source of support lay in her memories.

At first, Mio was always the one who drew our teachers' praise and our peers' admiration during our lessons. I, on the other hand, started off lousy at everything. It wasn't that bad, though—most everyone else was just as awful as I was, so I didn't stand out. I doubt that Mio ever even noticed me back then, considering. I had to wonder whether it even made sense to call us peers, considering she probably never even knew that I existed.

We'd joined the agency in the same month. That was the only thing tying us together...until Shooting Star was formed, and we were suddenly thrust into a working relationship with each other. The pretense of the group was that all of its members were the best of friends. Plus, it was decided that I would be the group's "face," while Mio would be my second in command. We'd be effectively joined at the hip, both on and off stage.

There's that look again. Mio glared daggers at me, still clenching my shoulder. If one of our fans saw us like this, they'd probably faint on the spot. It wasn't a look of determination—it was too rough for that. It was a look of anger, of enmity...and of jealousy. She'd been looking at me that way for as long as she'd been looking at me, period, and it had always made me uncomfortable.

"Well? Say something!" snapped Mio. "Where is this coming from? Why the sudden hiatus?!"

"It isn't sudden. This was the plan from the beginning," I said.

"What do you mean, the beginning?"

"I mean since before I debuted as an idol."

“Huh?!”

Ugh. I just want to go home, take a shower, get something to eat, and study... I had a mountain of tasks left to do that evening, and I’d be jumping right into another recording session the next morning. And then another. And another. Then more practice. My schedule was packed full from morning to night, and it goes without saying that there was no time left for me to go to school with all of that on my plate. I’d gotten into a high school with a performing arts department, with an understanding that my work would take priority, and I’d attended so few classes so far, I could still count them on one hand.

When I was in middle school, I’d had to attend a certain number of days’ worth of classes and go through an absurd number of supplementary lessons in order to qualify for my high school exams. The whole experience had pushed my endurance to its limits, and I’d caused some major headaches for a lot of people by forcing myself through it. Time, in short, was precious. I couldn’t afford to waste a single minute—not even a single second.

I sure as *hell* didn’t have any time to waste on a conversation like *this*.

“Since *before you debuted*?! What are you—”

“I believe I’ve already explained myself perfectly clearly. Are we done here?” I cut off the conversation, flashing Mio that same smile I *always* gave her. “Tell me—when the agency gave you the news, did they ask you to interrogate me?”

Mio drew in a sharp breath. “Wh-What are you...?”

I knew for a fact that they hadn’t, of course. I’d started taking lessons through our agency in middle school, and its president had been watching over me ever since. In fact, they probably had a clearer perspective on my life than even my parents. They knew how hard I’d worked to meet the attendance requirements and get my grades into a state that would allow me to go to high school. They knew exactly how much I’d wished that I could attend high school and college in peace and quiet, just like all the other kids my age, and how much work it had taken to block out time to study every single day in spite of my busy schedule.

The president knew all of that perfectly well—and so, when I’d first asked about taking a hiatus to focus on my studies, they’d agreed, albeit a bit reluctantly. I imagined that they’d shared the news with the rest of my unit’s

members in the hopes that it would prepare them for my eventual departure, and in the hopes that they would support me in my decision. At the very least, I never imagined for a second that they would *actually* ask the rest of my unit to try and talk me out of it.

“N-No way! I’m telling you *personally* that you’re being selfish! Do you realize how much trouble this is going to cause for the rest of us?!” Mio finally shouted.

I’d been keeping my tone cold and impersonal, but she was making no effort to hide her frustration. She was so frustrated, in fact, that she’d just let her *actual* reason for confronting me slip out, but I got the feeling she hadn’t even noticed that yet.

“We’re finally high schoolers! We’ll have so much time for work from now on!”

“Yes, exactly. That’s precisely why I would prefer not to *waste* my time,” I curtly replied. Her frustration had finally infected me. I was exhausted, physically, mentally, and emotionally, and I no longer had it in me to keep pretending to be my ideal self.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you trying to say that talking to me’s a waste?” Mio snapped.

I fell silent, and for a moment, she just stared at me.

“What’s your *problem*? Since when did you start talking to me like I’m a stranger?”

I’d provoked her, and now she was rising to the challenge—though she was the one who’d charged in and initiated the conflict in the first place, of course. In any case, the fact that she was now going out of her way to pick a fight was plain as day.

“Sure, we have to work with adults and older idols a lot, and we have to be polite *then*...but who keeps that going behind closed doors, seriously?” Mio rolled her eyes. “You think it makes you look mature or something? Because it doesn’t—it just makes you look like a pretentious pain in the ass!”

This time, I really did sigh. *I thought as much. She really doesn’t understand*

me. She doesn't understand the first thing about me. I was fine with that, though. We were nothing more than members of the same idol group. We weren't friends, and we certainly weren't family. *And no matter what...I'll still have her.*

"I'm going now. Have a nice day," I said, brushing off Mio's childish insult—as well as the hand on my shoulder—and heading for the door.

"Wha—hey!" Mio shouted, but I paid no attention to her protest and just walked away.

It was the middle of summer, but I still felt a bit chilly as I stepped out of the room, probably thanks to how sweaty the practice session had made me. My head was starting to hurt a little too, and in the end, I had to find an abandoned corner of the hallway to sit down in for a moment. I *wanted* to take a shower, but it would've been a pain if Mio had chased me to the locker room, and more than anything...

"Yotsy," I whispered to myself, saying the word I'd wanted to spit out so badly for so long.

There, where nobody was watching me—there, in that gloomy little corner—I could sequester myself in my own world...and be my own true self. I could whisper to the girl who would always be mine and mine alone.

"I did my best today, Yotsy. You'd be so proud of me, I just know it! You'd tell me how hard I've been working, and what a good job I've been doing, right...?"

I gazed at the picture I always carried with me, wherever I went—a picture from my time in kindergarten. It was of two girls, one of them a sad, timid little thing, and the other with a smile as brilliant as a firework in bloom, throwing her arms around the other.

That was her. Yotsuba Hazama. My beloved Yotsy.

Years and years had passed since that picture was taken. What, I wondered, was Yotsy doing these days? Did she know I'd become an idol? I would've been pretty embarrassed if she did, and a surprisingly large part of me sort of hoped she hadn't figured it out...which, in a certain sense, would actually be just like her. She was always cheerful, always bursting with energy and ready to put a

smile on my and everyone else's faces...but she was also just a little bit careless, I suppose. Maybe "spacey" would be the right word.

She was always there to save me when times were tough. When I was sad, she'd always be there before I knew it to console me. And of course, she was there during the fun, happy times as well! I think most girls have yearned for the dashing princes you see in fairy tales at some point in their lives...and to me, Yotsy filled that role.

What sort of person had she grown up into? Was she the same as ever? Or had she changed so much, I'd barely even recognize her? And, most of all...did she still remember the promise we'd made to each other?

The more I thought about it, the more pessimistic a place my mind drifted to. I found myself thinking that for all I knew, the Yotsy in my memories could be long gone. I'd become Maki Amagi in the intervening years, and there was no guarantee that Yotsy hadn't gone through the same sort of evolution. The more I thought about it, the more scared I became to meet with her once more.

"No," I said with a shake of my head. "Even if she *is* different now, that would be fine."

After all, if the Yotsy I knew wasn't around anymore...I'd just have to bring her back again.

"I'll get everything I want, and I won't play dirty to do it. I'll just keep working, slow and steady, and win it all with my own two hands."

Just like I'd done when I auditioned to join up with my agency. When I was evaluated for my pro debut. When I earned the center position in Shooting Star. When I sold out my first arena concert, packing it to capacity with my fans. When I made my first TV appearance. When I was cast as a regular on a weekly show. My work on TV dramas too—I'd started out with bit parts, and now I'd climbed my way up to the point where I starred as the leading role on the regular. My agency put plenty of work in to make that happen too, of course...but I still knew that, for the most part, I'd claimed my success by my own power.

"I'll never lose her... *Never*. Not Yotsy... No matter what it takes... I'll never let her go!"

I repeated my mantra to myself, over and over. *I am Maki Amagi. I'm Japan's preeminent idol. I'm incredible. I'm strong. Nobody will ever measure up to me. And that means...there's no way that Yotsy won't fall in love with me. And so...*

"Just a little longer, Yotsy. I'll come see you before you know it...so wait for me, okay?"

I gazed at the picture, at the little girl embracing my younger self, and smiled.



Epilogue: Peace Was Never in the Cards

“So, Yotsuba?”

I cringed. “Yes?”

“Before anything else, I think we should thank you for opening up to us about all this. Right, Rinka?”

“I’d say so, yes.”

It was the day after my date with Makina. I’d racked my brains for a clever way to resolve the situation that would work out perfectly for everyone...and after having *completely* failed to come up with anything, I decided that for the moment—or rather, for lack of any better options—I should go to Yuna and Rinka and confess absolutely everything that had happened.

It just so happened that my parents, Sakura, *and* Aoi were all out for the day, and Yuna and Rinka had been asking to come over to my place for some time anyway, so I invited them over and, once again, positioned myself in a full-blown, face-to-the-ground bow in the entryway to greet them. Then I led them into my living room, prostrated myself again, and told them about every last detail of my outing with Makina, from start to finish. *Gotta say, I’ve been getting pretty used to this whole bowing-in-apology thing lately!*

“Hey, Yotsuba?” said Rinka. I couldn’t see her face, on account of *mine* being shoved up against the ground, but her tone of voice sounded a little distant to me. “I’m curious. Just how many girls will you need to ask you out before you’re satisfied?”

“Ugh!” I grunted.

“I mean, really,” said Yuna. “First there was me, then Rinka, then your little sisters, and now this childhood friend! Was I *really* even the first? If *this* is the pace you’re going at, you’d think you’d hit triple digits within a year.”

“It’s not normal, really,” I moaned. “You were the first, I swear...”

I couldn't explain this turn of events any better than they could. Had I blundered my way into some sort of cosmic formula for mega-popularity? It certainly hadn't changed the fact that *boys* never so much as glanced in my direction!

"Umm, but, I mean," I stammered. "This is just a thought, but it kinda feels like all of this only started *after* I got together with you two...?"

"So you're saying it's *our* fault?" asked Yuna.

"N-No way! I just meant, y'know, maybe some of your oodles of charm rubbed off on me and made me look a little less puny and insignificant, that's all..."

"'Puny and insignificant'?" Rinka repeated. "You know, Yotsuba, there's a point at which self-deprecation goes so far, it becomes impossible to hear it as anything other than insincere."

"Huh?!"

"Maybe cool it on the bowing thing while you're at it," added Yuna.

"Huuuh?! " *But I was being totally sincere! I poured my whole heart and soul into this explanation! And now even my bowing routine's getting taken away from me?! But, of course, I had no right to veto their objections and sat up obediently.*

"Honestly," said Yuna. "Just *look* at yourself! What am I supposed to say to a face like that?"

"Wha?" I grunted.

"You look like you might burst into tears at any second! It almost feels like we're bullying you," Yuna sighed, though she couldn't suppress a giggle toward the end as well.

"We're not actually mad at you, Yotsuba," said Rinka. "I mean, yes, this is all quite the shock, but I think that's a given! Who *wouldn't* be surprised to learn that their girlfriend had some other girl randomly propose to her?"

"Ah," I grunted. She made a compelling case. If Yuna or Rinka ever came to me with a story like that, I was pretty sure I'd be so shocked I'd end up

bedridden for days.

“So?” said Yuna. “I hope you’re not about to tell us that you said yes?”

“N-No way! Of course I didn’t!” I shouted.

“So...you said no?”

“I...didn’t *exactly*...”

“Of course,” Rina sighed.

“*Of course*”?! *What does that mean, Rinka?! Of course what?!*

“You’re, how to put it...much too indecisive for your own good sometimes,” said Rinka.

“Seriously, you’re like a manga protagonist. The sort that gets all the girls even though they never try and never notice,” added Yuna.

I was being verbally eviscerated. I could *never* agree with a comparison that made *me* out as a protagonist...*but I also...can’t...deny it...!*

“This whole incident has made one thing very clear to me,” said Yuna.

“Me too,” agreed Rinka.

“Huh?! W-Wait, made what clear? Y-You don’t mean...?!” I stammered frantically as a truly terrible worst-case scenario flashed through my head. Then I flung myself down on reflex and clung to their feet with all I had! “I’m so sorryyy! I’ll be good, I promise! I’ll be better from now on, so please, don’t dump meee!!!”

“*Dump* you?!” Yuna gasped.

“Y-Yotsuba, please!” said Rinka.

“I’m begging you! I don’t know how I’d go on if the two of you dumped me!” I shouted. I have to admit, I was acting just about as pathetically as I possibly could’ve, but I still clung to the two of them for dear life. I certainly couldn’t *blame* them for giving up on a hopeless hot mess like me, but I just couldn’t imagine my life without them anymore!

“Come *on*,” sighed Yuna. “Neither of us said *anything* about dumping you, did we?!”

“B-But...”

“Okay, Yotsuba, let’s get you up off the floor—oh, yikes, you’re dripping snot all over the place!” yelped Rinka.

“B-Bhuhuuuh!” I wailed. Imagining that tragic potential future had turned on the waterworks before I knew it. Even though I was making a stupid, ridiculous, pathetic mess of myself, though, Yuna still rubbed my back gently while Rinka wasted a perfectly good handkerchief wiping my face clean. *They’re so nice... I love them so much...*

“You’re such a dummy sometimes, Yotsuba,” said Yuna. “You really think *we’d* ever dump you? We were the ones worried that *you’d* move on from *us* this whole time!”

“Huh...?”

“Truth be told, we didn’t like the idea of you going on a date with someone else, even if it *was* just an act,” Rinka admitted. “We were scared that you might drift away from us.”

“Yuna... Rinka...” I felt a tightness in my chest. All the worries and anxieties that Koganezaki had speculated about at the aquarium had been entirely real, and I was the one who’d made my girlfriends feel that way. “I’m sorry!” I said. “This whole time I’ve only been thinking about myself...”

“*Exactly!*”

“Whahuh?!” I yelped. Yuna’s shout felt like it had shattered the gloomy atmosphere that had been settling in over me. I looked up to find that she—and Rinka, for that matter—was grinning at me. Why, I couldn’t even begin to guess.

“At this point, I think we can all agree that there’s no telling *what* trouble you’ll get yourself into if we leave you alone, right?” said Yuna. “You’ll just keep drifting about here and there, bumping into people and making them fall for you left and right...and there’s only so much of *that* nonsense your poor girlfriends’ hearts can stand!”

“We certainly don’t want you to think we’re being too possessive,” said Rinka, “but we *do* have to draw a line somewhere. At this rate, it’s only a matter of time before you get yourself stabbed.”

“You think someone’s gonna *stab* me?!” I shouted, but the shock only lasted for the second it took for me to remember that I was currently two-timing Yuna and Rinka, and that if the Sacrosanct’s fan club found out about that, I’d *definitely* be in all sorts of hot water already. And that’s not even *starting* on the tens or hundreds of thousands of Maki Amagi fans who I might’ve recently made enemies of! *Getting stabbed might actually be getting off lightly, now that I think about it!* “O-Oh, jeez, what should I do?!”

“It’s all right!” Yuna confidently declared. “From now on, we’ll take care to keep you in check!”

“Don’t worry—we’d never let our precious girlfriend get stolen away from us,” added Rinka with a flirtatious wink.

I wasn’t really sure what to make of all this...but if Yuna and Rinka claimed that everything was all right and I didn’t have to worry, then I’d just have to take their word for it!

“Okay, then!” said Yuna as she rose to her feet. “Now that that’s decided, I think it’s time for us to get started! Right, Rinka?”

“Agreed,” said Rinka, who stood up as well. “We’re not giving you up to anyone, Yotsuba, childhood friend or not!”

The two of them turned to face me, and I gaped at them like a very confused deer in the headlights. “Uh, umm...guys?” I said.

“Hey, Yotsuba? You said your little sisters wouldn’t be back until late tonight, didn’t you?” asked Yuna.

“Y-Yeah,” I replied. “Sakura’s taking a summer course at her cram school, and Aoi went out to a birthday party for one of her friends.”

“We’ll be able to take our time, then,” said Rinka.

“Take our time with wh-what...?” I stammered.

Yuna and Rinka drew gradually closer to me, and I was so overwhelmed by their presence I ended up reflexively scooting backward. I could only scoot so far before I had nowhere left to run, though.

“We can’t have some other girl go leading you astray...so we’ll just have to

make sure you only have eyes for us, no matter *how* long it takes to drill it into you,” said Yuna.

“D-Drill it into me?!”

“We had to put our trip to a love hotel on hold the other day...but now that I think about it, having our first time at *your* house feels totally fair in its own right,” added Rinka.

“Our f-first time...?!“ *Does she mean, like...? I mean, what else could she possibly mean?!*

“Remind me—who are your girlfriends, again?” asked Yuna.

“We’ll make *very* sure you know the answer to that question,” said Rinka.

They’d literally driven me up against a wall, and as I heard the rustling of clothes before me, I gulped, then somehow managed to squeeze out a few words.

“S-So, umm...my room’s upstairs...”

And then...Yuna and Rinka made it very clear, at very great length, precisely who my girlfriends were and precisely what being their girlfriend meant. They taught me a lesson that neither my heart nor my body would ever forget.





Surprisingly enough, after our date at the aquarium, I didn't see Makina again even once over the rest of summer vacation. We texted back and forth a few times, but it seemed she was really busy preparing for something that I never quite managed to get a solid grasp of. Yuna and Rinka stayed a little on guard that whole time, but when all was said and done, our summer vacation really did end without any further incidents. And it goes without saying that the end of summer vacation meant the beginning of, well, *you* know.

"Bluuuh..."

"Little early for a groan like that, isn't it, Yotsuba?" said Sakura.

"You sounded *just* like a zombie!" chimed in Aoi.

"I *feel* like a zombie," I moaned. "I can't be the only one, right?! Summer vacation's *over*, for crying out loud!"

It was the morning of my school's opening ceremony, and I was sprawled out on our couch, still wearing my pajamas. Thinking back, it struck me that I'd just experienced the most fulfilling summer of my lifetime. It wasn't *all* sunshine and roses, sure, and I had *plenty* of stuff to think about in the wake of my vacation...but still, the end of summer was here, and the beginning of fall loomed large. Time marched on, regardless of my wishes.

"I wish the opening ceremony would never come... Then summer vacation wouldn't have to end at all..."

"Sorry, but that's definitely not happening," said Aoi.

"Oh, come *on*," Sakura sighed. "How long are you planning on lying around in your pajamas? Get up and get changed already!"

"Bluuuh..."

"Oh, that's *it*. Aoi!"

"Roger that!"

"Huh? Aoi? Sakura?!" I yelped as Aoi wrapped her arms around me, pinning me in place, and Sakura started stripping the pajamas right off me! They

weren't being *super* gentle about it, but, honestly, I didn't mind. If anything, getting changed by my little sisters felt like a special prize that only a big sister like me could receive!

"Just look at this bedhead, come on! Did you even *try* to take care of it?" Sakura grumbled as she gently brushed my hair.

"Hmm... I think I know what'll help you relax! I'll give you a massage," said Aoi, who looped around behind the couch and started rubbing my shoulders.

Wait a minute...is this the second coming of the little-sister hostess bar?! Actually, no—this feels more like a little-sister nursing home, with how they're taking care of me! It's a little-sister at-home nursing service!

"Heh... Heh heh heh," I chuckled. For a moment, it really felt like I'd slipped my way into heaven.

"All right, that should do it... Oh, for the—*Yotsuba!*" Sakura snapped, then gave my cheek a light slap.

"Whoa! I almost fell asleep," I said.

"And almost ruined all of our hard work!" countered Sakura. "Honestly, Yotsuba. I know the start of your second semester has you depressed, but try to keep in mind that this is *our* last day of summer vacation. We can't go wasting it like this!"

"Right! We're gonna go shopping after you leave," Aoi chimed in.

Ugh... I'm so, so jealous! That said, there was no way I could let myself get in the way of my little sisters' ability to enjoy every last little drop of summer vacation they had left. Part of me *was* preoccupied by the idle wish that my school's vacation lasted as long as theirs did, I have to admit, but I had to push through it! *Push, Yotsuba, push! You can do it...!*

"Mnggh... Mraaah!" I roared!

"You've got this, Yotsuba!" Aoi cheered!

"Is standing up seriously *that* hard? You're *that* dead set against going to school?" Sakura sighed.

"It's not that I don't wanna go!" I protested. "I just, well..."

“Right, right. Here,” said Sakura as she passed me my beautifully folded uniform. “And stand up straight! You look like a slob, slouching like that.”

“Man... Am I the only one who always feels like the last few moments of summer are slipping away from me when I put on my uniform again after the break?” I mumbled.

“No need to worry about that!” said Aoi. “The last moments of your summer ended *ages* ago!”

“*Bluuuh*,” I groaned, unable to argue with her, then started putting on my well—but not recently—worn school uniform. I mean, okay, I *did* have makeup lessons just the week before, so really I *had* worn it pretty recently, but you get the point!

“Well, it’s not like I don’t understand where you’re coming from,” said Sakura. “You *did* have a pretty busy summer, after all.”

“Yeah,” I sighed.

“I-I’m not *just* talking about the whole thing with us, of course!” she shouted. “You just really seemed to be getting the most out of every day, that’s all. You’ve been going out with people other than us *way* more lately, and...well, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel a little lonely thanks to that...but more than that, I’m glad to see you acting so fulfilled.”

“Sakura...”

“I know you’ll be just fine at school!” said Aoi. “I’m sure all *sorts* of fun stuff’s gonna happen in fall, and winter too! You’ll forget all about your post-summer blues before you know it!”

“Aoiii...” *Those two understand me so well! They’re so nice, and smart too!* Everything about them—from the way they looked at me, to their voices, to their touch—felt profoundly kind, and gave me an incredible burst of courage and energy.

“And besides,” said Sakura, “summer ending doesn’t change the important stuff! We’ll always be your sisters, no matter what time of year it is!”

“We’ll be with you forever, no matter how many years pass by! Decades,

even!” added Aoi.

“Yeah... Thanks, Sakura! Thanks, Aoi!” I said. One moment I’d been grumbling about going to school, and the next I was so emotional I threw my arms around them. One moment I’d been going to school, and the next I was so moved I almost shed a tear!

“Sheesh, you’re so dramatic... You’re gonna get your uniform all wrinkled, you know?” said Sakura.

“Hee hee!” Aoi giggled. “I’m positive you’ll be just fine! And no matter what happens, we’ll always be here for you!”

I really do have the best little sisters in the world, I thought to myself, overwhelmed with emotion once again. They’d given me the energy boost that I needed to successfully leave my house—albeit just barely.



I set out, walking through the residential districts on my way to school. Most Eichou High students took the train in the mornings. I wasn’t the only person who walked on a daily basis, to be sure, but I had yet to bump into anyone else walking from my general neighborhood. As a result, I was always alone when I joined up with the stream of students flowing from the nearest train station to the school. That kept things nice and simple, I guess, but I have to admit that I also felt a little lonely sometimes, walking all alone... Ever since the first semester had ended, I *had* started taking a detour to join up with Yuna and Rinka, of course, but that still left me with a twenty-minute stretch of my commute that I spent in solitude.

Not that being alone is anything new for me, of course. At the very least, I hadn’t paid it any mind at all back when I was a first-year. Nor while I was a middle schooler, or for most of elementary school, for that matter. I’d never had friends, so I’d just gotten used to being alone...or, well, I’d *convinced* myself I was used to being alone, anyway. Now, though, things were different. I had friends, and I had *girlfriends* too...and the more I got used to that, the more I started disliking the times I had to be all by my lonesome. It was getting so bad that even just the brief walk to school was enough to bring my loneliness to the front of my mind.

“Yotsubaaa!”

“Wait...huh?” *That’s weird—I thought I heard a voice! And one that I’ve been hearing a weirdy large amount of lately too... N-Nah, I must’ve been imagining it. Just a specter of summer fun long gone, trying to lure me back into its nostalgic embrace! The temptations of a summer devil... Actually, no, more like a summer angel...?*

“Yoootsuuubaaa!”

“There it is again... Wait, *huh?!*” I yelped and stopped in my tracks. This time, the voice was loud enough that there was no mistaking it, and at that precise moment, the platinum-haired angel herself leapt out from a side road and sailed right in front of me! It was Emma!

“It’s Yotsuba indeed!” Emma exclaimed. She’d burst onto the scene at an incredible speed—I’m talking sports-car velocities, here—and *almost* sailed right into the wall on the opposite side of the road! Right before she slammed into it, though, she pulled her foot up, kicked *off* it, and twirled through the air before—*wham!*—touching down gracefully right in front of me!

“O-Oh, wow! That was incredible!” I gasped.

“Indeed, and good morning!” Emma replied.

“Yeah! Morning, Emma...wait, *wait!* What’re you *doing* here?!”

“I sensed you! And so I came to see you, indeed!”

“Oooh, you sensed me! Okay!” I said with a nod.

Part of me *did* wonder, *Wait, how the heck did she sense me?* of course, but considering this was Emma we were talking about, I figured she was probably telling the truth. *And besides, why bother thinking too hard about it? I’m not gonna figure it out regardless, knowing me!*

“And oh, hey, it’s been ages since I’ve seen you wearing your uniform! It looks so great on you!” I added.

“Hee hee! Thank you, indeed!” Emma said with a grin.

She was a little on the short side, so our high school’s uniform made her look like a kid who was dressing up in her big sister’s clothes, but in a weird sort of

way that actually made it suit her even better! *She's killing that outfit, honestly! She's so cute... Makes me wanna pick her up and carry her right on home with me...*

"Emma!"

"Ah! Sister dearest!"

While I was preoccupied pondering a crime, Koganezaki arrived, sprinting onto the scene from the same direction Emma had come from.

"How...many times...have I told you...not to run off like that?" Koganezaki gasped. She was panting for breath, her hands planted on her knees.

I've never seen her look that exhausted before! It's actually kinda refreshing—wait, no, not the time! "Umm, here! I have water...ah, actually, I guess I only have iced tea right now, but you can have some if you want!" I said, offering her the bottle I always kept in my schoolbag, which happened to be filled with barley tea today.

"Thanks," Koganezaki said as I passed it over to her. She must've been *really* thirsty; she took a long, gulping swig before gasping for air. "Ahhh! I needed that."

"Y-Yeah, no kidding," I said.

"Thank you again, Hazama...but come to think of it, what are you doing here?" asked Koganezaki.

"I mean, nothing? I'm just walking to school! I always take this route."

"Ah... I understand now," Koganezaki said with a nod that told me she'd just read quite a lot into my words. Then she let out a deep sigh as her head drooped downward. "Emma?"

"Yes indeed, sister dearest!" Emme chirped.

"I appreciate that you were excited to see Hazama, but dashing off to meet her without warning is only going to cause her trouble."

"Huh...? Trouble? Did I, indeed?" Emma asked, looking over at me with a wide-eyed expression of shock.

“Oh, no, not at—”

“A *moment*, Hazama?” said Koganezaki, cutting me off and dragging me a short distance away by my hand.

Emma didn’t follow us, but she *did* keep her grief-stricken eyes glued to us all the while, and I was already starting to feel really sorry for her.

“I’m telling you this for your own good: you shouldn’t indulge her whims any more than you absolutely have to,” Koganezaki said, quietly enough that Emma wouldn’t hear us.

“Huh?” I grunted.

“I need you to imagine the potential consequences. Imagine how it would feel to know that anywhere, at any moment, Emma might descend upon you without warning.”

“Oh, come on—anywhere, any time? That’s...p-pretty plausible, actually...”

Now, I’m not saying that I thought Emma was thoughtless, or lacked common sense, *per se*. I *can* say, however, that whether I was out on a date, in class, or eating dinner with my family—in just about any circumstance conceivable, basically—I could *easily* imagine her making one of her trademark unexpected appearances!

“I can tell you how it would feel: you’d wind up living in fear, knowing that every minute—every *second*—she could charge into your life without warning. Before long you’d start jumping at shadows, believing she *must* be lurking around every corner, until you’re reduced to a shivering wreck.”

“Don’t tell me that’s actually happened to someone before?!” I gasped.

“Oh, no. Not at all,” said Koganezaki.

It hasn’t?! Are you sure?! Because you really made it sound like it has!

“As a matter of fact, this is actually the first time Emma’s grown this attached to someone,” she continued. “I certainly can’t see it myself, but I have to admit...there really might be something special about you.”

“Wh-What do you mean, ‘something special’?” I asked.

“It’s as if you’re drawing people toward you. First the Sacrosanct, then your sisters, and now even an idol... You haven’t bought any strange perfume from a suspicious stranger in a dark alleyway recently, have you?”

“You think I paid some sketchy back-alley dealer to get me into this situation?!”

“On second thought, not recently. That timeline doesn’t follow—you met up with the Sacrosanct right after you started high school, after all. In other words, it would make the most sense for you to have started drugging your way to popularity right when your first year started, in the hopes it would let you reinvent your public persona...”

“I did *not*! I haven’t drugged my way into *anything*, back then or now!” I insisted! I was *not* going to let her start thinking of me as the sort of dangerous freak who’d use whatever sketchy means I could get my hands on to force people to like me!

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t,” Koganezaki conceded easily. Thankfully, it didn’t seem like she’d been serious to begin with. “In any case, setting aside *how* you’ve ended up in Emma’s sights, the point is that if you indulge her too much, *you’re* the one who’ll suffer for it. Emma’s still purehearted and naive when it comes to how the world works. She’s not even slightly malicious...but her innocence could very well cause you a world of trouble. Maybe you think that would be a worthwhile trade, but if that arrangement ends up causing you distress, it’ll make Emma herself sad in turn.”

“I understand...” I begrudgingly admitted.

I’d bumped into Emma quite a few times over summer break, and I’d been pretty pleased with how well the two of us had ended up getting along. I was happy that she’d grown attached to me...or, well, happy that she’d let me into her social bubble, anyway. Koganezaki had a point, though. Having her show up out of the blue anywhere, any time might be fun at *first*, but it would probably get harder and harder to put up with as time went on. I didn’t think I’d ever grow to *dislike* her, no matter what happened, but if I started resenting her even a little, and if she picked up on those feelings... Anyway, that was a situation I wanted to avoid at all costs.

“Yotsuba...?” Emma whimpered.

“Emma,” I said, turning to face her.

“Am I troubling you, indeed? Am I a bother?”

“You... You’re... Of *course* you aren’t!” I shouted!

I can’t reject her! I just can’t! I like spending time with her way too much to pull that off!

“Oh, I know! Why don’t we talk on the phone sometime?”

“On the phone?” repeated Emma.

“Yeah! I gave you my number the other day, remember? Meeting up in person’s nice and all, but wouldn’t it be fun to talk on the phone too sometimes?”

I couldn’t tell her that she could come see me *any* time, but I didn’t want to drive a wedge between us either. I’d used every scrap of smarts I had to come up with an idea to keep that from happening!

“Talking on the phone’s *great*, actually! You can’t see the person you’re talking to, so you end up getting all curious about what they’re doing, and what sort of expression they’re making and stuff! It’s kinda restrictive, I guess, but all the things you *don’t* know make you think about the person you’re talking to that much more, and make it so much better when you finally get to meet them in person again!”

“It does? So then, I’d be even more glad to meet you in person than I am already?” asked Emma.

“You would! It’d be way better! *So* much better!”

“So much?! Indeed?!” Emma repeated, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

It sooorta felt like I’d taken her in with a cheap trick, like how you’d convince a little kid to do your bidding, but I hadn’t *lied* and she seemed totally sold on the idea, so I figured it had all worked out for the best...hopefully.

I wonder what Koganezaki thinks, though? I glanced over, curious about what sort of face she’d be making, and found her smiling at Emma with all the

warmth and affection you'd expect from a mother watching her very own child.
I...guess I can probably take that as a good sign?

It sort of felt like she was so soft on Emma that Emma's happiness took precedence over everything else. Not that I was one to talk, considering I could be just as bad when it came to Sakura and Aoi! *Maybe if I get to know Emma better and really figure her out, I'll be able to give Koganezaki advice about her like she gave me advice about my sisters!*

"But, to want to meet you even *more* than I do now...I'd have to fall in love with you, indeed!" Emma added, pressing her hands to her cheeks and grinning bashfully.

"Uh?" *Fall in love with me? Umm, okay, wait a minute. Which "love" are we—*
Fwap!!!

Augh! My shoulder!

"Oh, Hazama? A word, if you'd be so kind?" Koganezaki said as she tightened her grip on my shoulder with perhaps the single most excessively perfect smile I'd ever seen on her face.

"O-Okay," I agreed with tears in my eyes, for lack of any other option. Frankly, I'm just glad that I managed not to wet myself.



And so my second semester started off with a tumultuous bang before I even made it to school.

It wasn't long before a thought struck me: *Wait...isn't this basically no different from how things went for me over the summer?!* My morning had started off with my little sisters kicking up a fuss, then Emma had arrived like a bolt from the blue to scare the bejesus out of me, followed by Koganezaki arriving to give me a stern lecture. And next, of course...

"Okay, Yotsuba, what's got you smirking today?"

"Did something happen during the opening ceremony? You've been grinning ever since we got back to the classroom."

...I got to meet up with Yuna and Rinka! And not only that, they were sitting

right in front of me in our usual classroom!

“Heh heh heehh...”

“Just *look* at that expression! If only you knew how much of a slob you look like right now,” sighed Yuna.

“To be fair, this *is* a first,” said Rinka.

Earlier that morning, before the entrance ceremony, everyone in our class had drawn lots to determine the seating chart for the new semester. The relevant results: Rinka was seated second from the back, next to the windows, and Yuna was right next to her. I, meanwhile, was right behind Yuna...meaning that the three of our desks formed a perfect group together! The seat behind Rinka, by the way—that is to say, the last seat in the row by the windows—was unoccupied, on account of our classroom having one more desk than it did students. In other words, not only did it *feel* like we had our own happy little corner of the classroom to ourselves, it really *was* a space just for us in a practical sense as well!

“This is the first time I’ve *ever* gotten this lucky in a lottery!” I said.

“I’m sorry—say that again, Miss Got-Into-This-School-By-Rolling-A-Pencil?” jabbed Yuna.

Rinka chuckled. “Personally, I’d say you earned this. You said that your makeup lessons went really well, after all, right?”

“Yeah! Miki told me that I was doing *way* better on the worksheets than—” I began, only to be cut off as—barely a moment after I’d said her name—our homeroom teacher, whose proper name was Miss Miki Abiko, stepped into the room.

“My apologies for arriving late,” Miki said in a matter-of-fact tone as she stepped up to her podium. It *had* been about fifteen minutes since the opening ceremony ended, and I’d sort of been wondering what the holdup was. “Now then. To start, we’ll be welcoming a new student into our class as of today.”

Huh?!

“Does that mean we got an exchange student?!” one of my classmates

shouted.

“Essentially, though technically speaking we’re getting a *transfer* student from a different district,” said Miki.

That unexpected piece of news sent the classroom into an instant uproar. Needless to say, the three of us were just as excited as everyone else!

“A transfer student?! That’s a first, right?!” I asked. “We didn’t get one in our first year, and I don’t think any of the other classes did either!”

“That’s right,” Yuna agreed, “and since the exam you have to take to transfer into Eichou High’s supposed to be incredibly tough, they must be really bright.”

“Interesting,” said Rinka. “Who do you think’s a rarer case, then? The transfer student or Yotsuba?”

“Oh, Yotsuba, *obviously*. I think we can safely assume our new classmate didn’t get in via the pencil lottery.”

Our classmates started peppering Miki with predictable questions—whether the transfer student was a guy or a girl, and stuff like that—but Yuna and Rinka had already shifted to using the situation to tease me. To be honest, I’d been thrown off my stride by the unexpected turn of events just as much as the rest of our classmates had, and I was once again struck by just how impressive it was that those two could stay so composed in the face of a shocker like this.

Though, come to think of it, it’s hard to imagine anything making me feel more nervous than I am when I’m around those two, I thought to myself. I mean, what could be more nerve-racking than hanging out with two of the prettiest girls on the planet? I felt a little bad for judging the transfer student before I’d even seen them, but I was very sure that no matter who they turned out to be, I wouldn’t be shaken in the slightest!

“Well, then,” said Miki, “please come in and introduce yourself.”

“All right,” a remarkably bright and upbeat voice replied from the hallway.

Huh...? Is it just me, or have I heard that voice somewhere before...? I wondered, but all of my doubts were dispelled the instant she walked into the classroom—no, the instant her toes crossed the threshold.

The whole class was struck dumb at the sight of her—me, Yuna, and Rinka included. She was slender and beautiful, with a figure that suggested an adultlike maturity, and her long, lovely hair shimmered in the sunlight that beamed through the classroom's windows. Her gaze was overflowing with confidence, her nose was perfectly shapely, and an ever so slight smile graced her lips. In the few sparing steps it took for her to move from the door to beside the teacher's podium, she claimed the classroom's full attention and made it *her* space. She came to a stop with the grace and precision of a fashion model up on the runway and swept her gaze across the classroom...until finally it landed on me, and she smiled.

"It's nice to meet you all," she said. "My name is Makina Oda, and I'm pleased to be your classmate from today forward."

A stir rushed through the classroom. A name had just sprung into everyone's minds, I knew, and it *wasn't* the name she'd just introduced herself by. And, sure enough...

"Makina...Oda...?" muttered Yuna.

"Don't tell me she's *actually*...?!" said Rinka, who sounded just as dumbfounded.

A moment later, both of them spun around to look at me.

Only a very small number of people knew the name Makina Oda. But everyone—and I do mean *everyone*—knew the girl who stood before us on sight.

She was Maki Amagi, Japan's most famous seventeen-year-old.



“You’ll be seated in the unoccupied desk, Miss Oda. I’m sure the rest of you have plenty of questions in mind at the moment, but please refrain from asking them until after homeroom is finished,” said Miki.

There was only one unoccupied desk in our classroom. It was the one in the farthest back row, right by the windows. The one *right next to me!*

The class’s excitement hadn’t died down at all, but Makina strode right on through them, accepting their gawking stares with grace as she approached me. She walked between Yuna and Rinka, and then, before she sat down...

“Looking forward to studying with you, Yotsy,” she whispered in my ear.

Almost identical looks of shock passed across Yuna’s and Rinka’s faces. They’d figured everything out in that single split second. Makina had abruptly stepped onto the scene as a transfer student, and I was left sitting there, a waterfall’s worth of cold sweat dripping down my back.

How on earth did it come to this?! And what the heck is gonna happen to my school life now?!

Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta the Third—Fin

Afterword

My editor informed me that this volume would be published this past July. I'd been hoping that the series would be able to continue prior to then, but if you're going to call yourself a writer, you can't let yourself come to a standstill at times of uncertainty, and I'd actually scheduled an appointment with my editor for the sake of fielding a proposal for a totally *different* new work I'd been preparing in the meantime. The news that this one would be able to continue came in about three days before that meeting was supposed to happen, and I spent those three days throwing together a proposal for *The Third's* plot as quickly as I possibly could.

There were a ton of aspects of this volume I spent a lot of time fretting over, but the biggest by far was its ending. If I can be frank for a minute, considering that I wasn't at all prepared to assume that this third volume would be published, it's very easy for me to imagine that I'm going to spend days on end praying feverishly for another volume after *The Third* is released as well. Considering that, I wanted to write *The Third* with the acknowledgment that it could end up being the series's final volume in mind.

If this was going to be the final volume, then it goes without saying that I'd want to leave off at a satisfying point in the story without any obvious sources of trouble looming on the horizon. In that sense, I believe that the first volume and *The Second* each stood on their own as individual works, with the problems they centered around being both raised and resolved in a single volume (if I can sing my own praises for a minute). It goes without saying that I considered structuring *The Third* in the same manner...but, well, that's where all the fretting came into play.

I'm sure that all the readers who read the first two volumes had ideas about what sort of story *The Third* might tell, if it came out. I'm not going to list out all the possibilities that come to mind at this particular moment, but to make a long story short, I ended up deciding not to have a member of the current cast do something big and dramatic, but rather to rock the boat and disrupt the

characters' established relationships by throwing a totally new character into the equation.

There are a ton of reasons why I decided to go in this direction. For one thing, I happen to like the relationships that all of the already existing characters have built up with the protagonist over the course of the first two volumes, and I wasn't super fond of the idea of changing those around dramatically over the course of a single volume. I also wanted to communicate to the readers that the world of *Yuri Tama* was one that still had room to expand freely in all sorts of directions. In fact, that was probably the most important reason of all.

I mean, to begin with, the protagonist of this series, Yotsuba Hazama, is kind of a weirdo—the sort of weirdo who'd jump into a two-timing relationship without a second thought. She's a girl who's already dating two other girls, *and* has a pair of sisters and potentially even a friend or two who have stronger-than-usual feelings for her as well. Considering the sort of protagonist she is, it almost feels inevitable that a totally new character with feelings for her would come plummeting into her life like a bolt from the blue at some point or another.

That, if I may flatter myself again, is one of the things that makes the new character who's introduced in *The Third*, Makina Oda, such a fun addition to the cast. She was the product of an hour-long brainstorming session with my editor in a café that *barely* had its air conditioner running, even though it was July at the time. The ultimate product of that conversation was the powerfully appealing phrase “mega-idol childhood friend,” from which Makina was born.

Conveniently enough, my editor just so happened to be in charge of a number of other Overlap series featuring idol heroines. That was all it took to make Yuuichi, the wandering karate fighter who lives in my mind (his hobby: dojo-busting), to scream out “No choice, then—*Yuri Tama's* gonna have to bust its way into Overlap's idol heroine division!” Oh, and also, my editor said something along the lines of “Don't you want to see what an idol drawn by Kuro Shina (this novel's illustrious illustrator) would look like?” so that was a motivating factor as well. Actually, that was probably about eighty percent of my motivation alone. Of course, introducing a new heroine at this point in the story means that sparks are definitely going to have to fly between her and the

current heroines, Yuna Momose and Rinka Aiba! “You’ve got a lot of plot lines piling up,” as Rin, the scooter-riding girl who lives in my mind (her hobby: camping), put it.

So, yeah—that’s how Makina Oda was born, bringing with her *way* too many plot elements to be covered in a single volume, along with an outrageous pile of sentiment to top them off. And, while there’s always a possibility that the story will be finished someday, I wrapped this volume up in the hope that my readers will enjoy the ever-expanding world of *Yuri Tama* and appreciate the potential for future developments as our heroine Yotsuba is left surrounded by a horde of girls and screaming for help, regardless of what the future may bring. Please feel free to imagine what could happen next or what might have been if things had played out just a little differently! I’ll be very happy if you do!

Of course, actually being able to put out a continuation of the story would be ideal, so I appreciate any and all support that you can offer. Plugging the series to your friends and family, writing reviews on social media and shopping websites, and filling in the online survey mentioned at the end of the volume would all be very helpful! Every little bit of support counts, and every little bit is appreciated!

If I *do* get to write another volume...hmm. I’ve really gotten a taste for this whole “if I add a new character to the story, I’ll get a super cute character design in return” thing, so maybe I’ll put *four* new characters in all at once next time! The new school term’s just starting, so that’d be totally natural, right? I also want to give Makina more chances to really show off the appealing traits of her character, and also give some more screen time to a certain mysterious coworker of Makina’s who has rather extreme feelings for her, as well as the unexpectedly popular Miss Miki... My dreams for the volume just get bigger and bigger by the minute.

And with that, I think it’s time to bring this afterword—which I had to make *really* long for the sake of fine-tuning the volume’s page count—to a close. Last but not least, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for purchasing *Yuri Tama: From Third Wheel to Trifecta the Third*! See you again in *The Fourth: Koganezaki Breaks Down!* (*final concept pending*). Farewell!

“Yotsy! Wait
for me, Yotsy!”

“Hee hee, nooope!
You don’t wait
up when you’re
playing tag!”



A full-page illustration of Makina Oda standing in an aquarium. She has long, flowing light blue hair with pink highlights, purple eyes, and a small white flower with a yellow center in her hair. She is wearing a light blue dress with a dark green patterned cardigan and a brown belt. A yellow bag is slung over her shoulder. The background is a large aquarium tank with various fish and coral.

“If I could
have you call
me whatever
I wanted...”

“...I think I'd
be happiest
if you went
with Makina.”

MAKINA ODA

A nationally renowned idol who performs under the stage name Maki Amagi. On the same day she drops the bombshell announcement that she's taking a hiatus from show business, she makes a sudden appearance at her childhood friend Yotsuba's house —but why...?



“Oooh, a **date?**”
“My dearest sister
and I are **out on a**
date as well!”

EMMA SHIZUMI

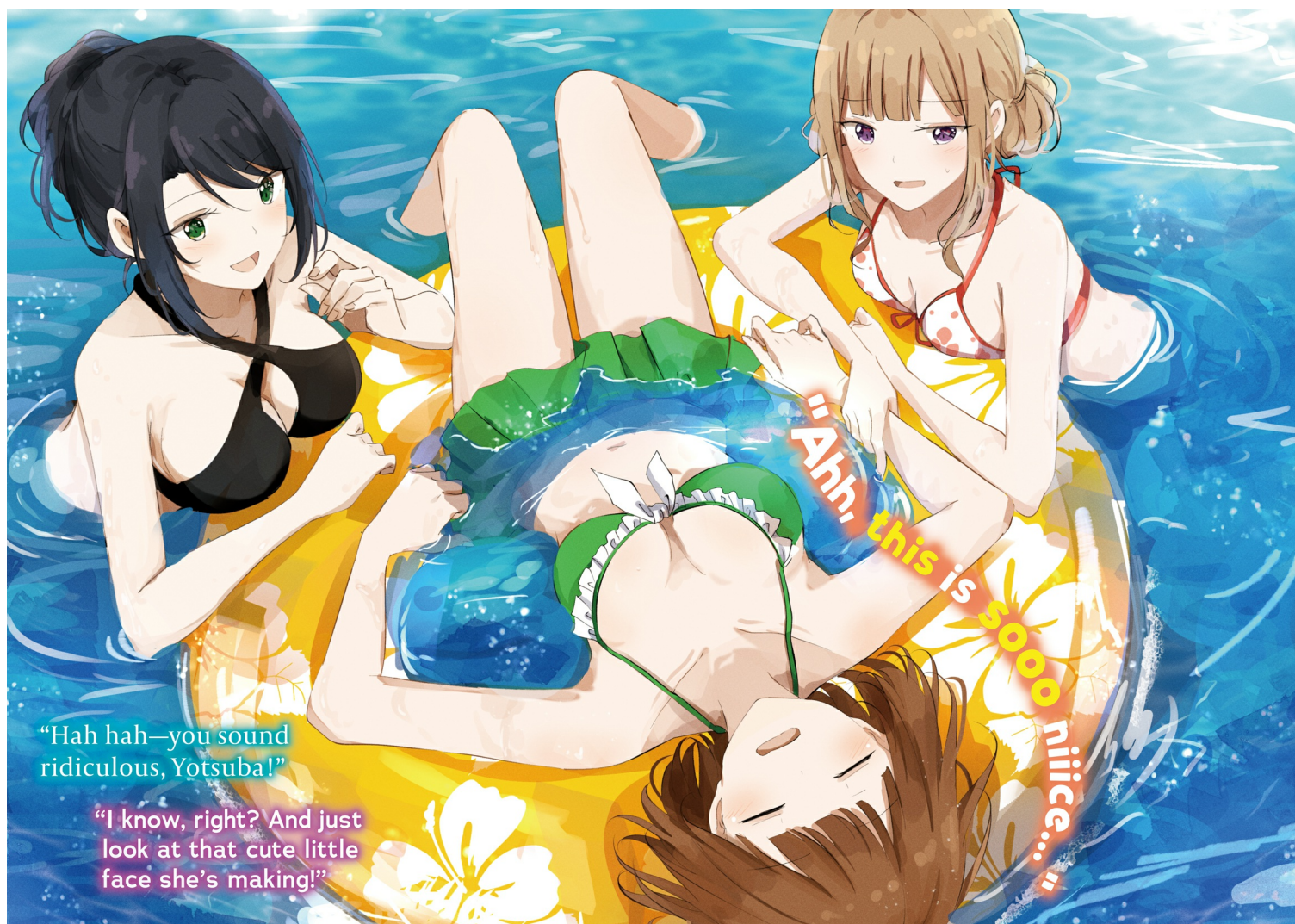
Mai Koganezaki's self-proclaimed little sister and biggest fan. Though her behavior is unpredictable at best and maddening at worst, her purehearted innocence still charms everyone around her. A veritable angel.



“I’ve long since concluded that ‘**common sense**’ is a complete non-factor when **you’re** in the picture.”

MAI KOGANEZAKI

The vice-president of the Sacrosanct’s fan club, the members of which revere Rinka and Yuna’s relationship. Her harsh but logical and reasonable perspective allows her to give the advice Yotsuba needs to dig herself out of the holes she constantly finds herself in.



Bonus Short Stories

Yotsuba Tries a Gacha Game

"Come join the adventure with us!"

"Oooh," I cooed excitedly.

"Hmm," Rinka hummed, a little more skeptically.

The two of us were staring at a computer screen. Specifically, we were watching a video featuring a fantastical monster character frolicking about to advertise a gacha game—you know, one of the ones people play on their phones—that had been all the rage recently. I'd never played a game like that before, so I didn't really get it, but, like...I was pretty sure I'd seen commercials for this one on TV before, at least? Maybe?

"We'll be playing *this* today!" declared Yuna, who was both the person who'd made us watch the video and the primary resident of the room we were in.

"Is this the one you've mentioned playing every once in a while?" asked Rinka.

"*Non!*" said Yuna. "I've never played it either. I thought it'd be fun for all of us to start fresh with it together!"

"Oh, cool! The characters are all so cute," I observed.

"I knew you'd understand, Yotsuba! You've got a keen eye for the important details!" said Yuna. "That's part of why this one's so popular with girls. It's all about the characters—you get to collect them, raise them, and make them compete in all sorts of contests and stuff!"

"*Contests?* All sorts of them?!" I gasped.

"Not you *personally*. Your *characters* do the competing," said Rinka.

"O-Oh, right! Duh!" For just a second there, I'd flashed back to so many traumatic childhood experiences at once that I'd almost passed out on the spot.

Good thing Rinka was there to pull me out of the fire!

“Anyway, why tell when I could show? Let’s give it a go!” said Yuna.

Rinka and I let her sweep us up in her enthusiasm, and were soon downloading the game onto our phones.

Oh, I see. Judging by the tutorial, the whole game was about raising and training your characters. The actual contests played out automatically, more or less. *Phew... If this were one of those games that takes reflexes and stuff, I would’ve been out of the running before the match even started!*

“Okay, I get it,” said Rinka. “Training your little guys *does* seem like it could be pretty fun.”

“The game’s lit a fire in her coach’s spirit!” I said.

“For the record, I’ve never lost at studying, and I’m not planning on losing at games either!” said Yuna.

“And now it’s lighting a fire in *your* sore loser’s spirit!”

I can already tell this is gonna get serious! I might not have any hope of winning, but I’d better at least try hard enough to not lose that badly!



One hour later...

“...”

“U-Umm... Guys?”

We’d all finished the tutorial, done our first free gacha spin to build up our rosters, then sent our characters out to do battle with each other...and now I was watching the words “YOU WIN!!!” dance across my screen. Yuna’s and Rinka’s screens, I assumed, were displaying the exact opposite message.

“H-Ha ha ha... Guess I must’ve gotten lucky?” I said.

“That’s right...” said Yuna. “I’d forgotten all about *that* part!”

“Huh?”

“The single most important factor to winning at gacha games is *luck*! All the

smarts, dedication, and effort in the world can *never* win against overwhelming luck in this field!”

We’d been competing exclusively with the characters that the free post-tutorial gacha spin had doled out to us, and according to a quick round of research courtesy of Yuna, I’d drawn an ultra-busted, meta-defining character who almost never turned up in the unit pool. She and Rinka, on the other hand, had drawn characters who weren’t particularly effective at all. Our match had been like having an adult throw down with a couple of kindergarteners: so utterly unbalanced it was just plain *wrong*.

“How did we not realize this in advance? Outrageous luck is Yotsuba’s middle name!” said Rinka.

“Wait, what? I’m pretty sure I’d know if I had a middle name like—”

“Heh heh heh...no need to worry,” said Yuna. “This is a gacha game...and that means there’s one other factor that plays just as important of a role as your luck...”

“Another factor...?” Rinka repeated. Her eyes widened. “Yuna, you *wouldn’t*!”

“If you can’t get lucky on the first draw, then draw and draw again! You just have to keep that gacha spinning like no tomorrow!”

“N-No, Yuna! You can’t! Stop!” I shouted. Keeping the gacha spinning would mean going well beyond that first free pull—in other words, she’d have to spend *money* on it!

“Let go of me, Yotsuba! I can’t spin the gacha with you holding me back like this!”

“That’s the point! Restrain your competitive spirit! Now’s not the right time to let it take control!”

“...”

“Rinka?! Why are you glaring at your phone like that?! Don’t even think about it!” *Next thing I know, she’ll be spending money on this game without any warning at all!* “Agggh! Okay, listen up, you bunch of sore losers!” I shouted, holding my phone aloft for all to see!

“Yotsuba?!” yelped Yuna.

“Y-You wouldn’t!” Rinka shouted in protest...but they were too late!

“Uninstall!”

“Nooooooo!” they both howled.

Just like that, all traces of the gacha game were wiped from my phone and I bade my ultra-broken first draw a fond farewell. It sort of felt like a waste, but as I saw the light of madness fade from Yuna’s and Rinka’s eyes, I knew it had been worth it.

I think we’re out of the woods this time around...but I’m going to need to keep an eye on those two and make sure their competitive sides don’t spiral out of control again in the future! I told myself, speaking from a moral high ground that I most definitely did *not* occupy.

Aoi’s Friends Incoming!

I, Yotsuba Hazama, am currently just about as nervous as I’ve ever been!

We’d just passed the halfway point of summer vacation when I got the news: Aoi would be bringing her friends over to our house for the day! It seemed they’d made plans to do their summer homework together, and had chosen our home as the venue. I was handling the news, well...

“Yotsuba, please, cool it with the pacing!” snapped Sakura.

“But! *But!!!*” I wailed.

This was, in fact, the very first time that Aoi had ever brought friends over to our house. She and Sakura *had* plenty of friends, unlike me, but neither of them ever seemed to bring anyone over...and I was totally convinced that they’d refrained from doing so in order to spare their loner of a big sister’s feelings.

“But, like, Aoi’s friends are all super bright, cheery *extroverts* and stuff, right...? Not that I’ve ever met them,” I said.

“I mean, I guess I can’t deny that,” said Sakura. “They talk to me at school every once in a while, and they’re a little much for me, honestly.”

They're a little much for Sakura?! But she has social skills! If she can't handle them, then where does that leave me?!

"Of course, you'd already graduated by the time they started at our middle school," Sakura continued. "That means that they don't know what a screwup you can be, at least, right?"

"Oh! Good point..." Does that mean they won't come into this with a whole biased image of me preestablished...? Ah, but I really am a screwup, so I guess that doesn't make any difference.

"Anyway, it'll be fine," said Sakura. "You've been acting a lot more confident lately, and you barely have that gloomy sad-sack aura at all anymore."

"Wait, you mean I used to have one of those?!"

"And anyway, you're two-timing Yuna and Rinka, for crying out loud! You can't keep up the terrified loner act when you're dating two hotties like them—that'd be rude to all the *real* terrified loners out there."

"R-Right, sorry," I replied meekly. Unfortunately, Sakura was absolutely right about that. *Those two are the amazing ones, though, not me! I haven't changed at all...I think.*

"Anyway, Aoi said to just act normal, right? So stop fidgeting and try to stay calm."

"Yeah...I'll do my best!!!"

"I think you're trying a little *too* hard there, actually...but eh, that works," Sakura said with an exasperated sigh as I pumped my fist in the air and hyped myself up for the meeting to come!



About a half hour later...

"I'm hooome!"

"Excuse us!"

"...They're here!" I yelled, shooting to my feet the moment I heard Aoi's voice ring out from the entryway.

“Normal, Yotsuba! Act normal!” Sakura scolded.

“R-Right, yeah,” I said, sitting right back down again. *Act normal, act normal...wait, how do I normally act...? A-Anyway, just breathe deeply and try to calm down!*

“Oh, it’s Sakura! Heyo!”

“H-Hey, Miwa. Good to see you,” said Sakura as a girl I’d never seen before rushed in and *h-hugged her out of nowhere?! She had short hair tied into these teeny little pigtails, and that was about all I registered before she just straight up hugged Sakura!*

“Miwa, please. You’re making her uncomfortable.”

“Ah?! Whoopsie! Sorry!”

Next to arrive was a slender, boyish-looking girl with a slight tan and a very sporty sort of vibe. The boyish girl scolded the hugger, who quickly released Sakura, and that brief exchange alone was enough for me to immediately pick up on the power balance in their relationship.

“I-It’s just you two today, huh?” said Sakura.

“Yup!” said the hugger. “No boys allowed in the Hazama house, after all!”

“The boys sure *wanted* to come, though,” noted the boyish girl. “They were chomping at the bit for a chance to get to know you better.”

“Ha ha ha... Oh, were they?” said Sakura, a little uncomfortably. It seemed that she and Aoi were both pretty famous at their school for being a pair of beauties. Which was, of course, only natural!

“So, I guess that would make *her* you-know-who...?” said the hugger.

Wait, who knows who? Why would they know me? “I, umm... I’m Aoi and Sakura’s older sister, Yotsuba,” I said.

“Yotsuba!”

“Whahuh?” *Why are Aoi’s friends looking at me like that? What’s with the sparkles in their eyes?!*

“My name’s Miwa Miwa! All my friends just call me Miwamiwa!”

“And I’m Tsubasa Takamachi! I’m, uhh, in the volleyball club at school, and I want to be a beach volleyball pro someday!”

“O-Oh? Cool,” I said. *So, uhh, Sakura’s fan is Miwa, and the athletic girl’s Takamachi. I’ve got names to match their faces now, but seriously, why the heck are they looking at me like that?!*

“I finally got to meet our school idols’ big sister...” said Miwa. “And she really *does* have a sort of *dignity* I just can’t quite put my finger on!”

“A *what*?! I really, really don’t!” I yelped.

“And modest too,” said Takamachi with a nod. “Yotsuba Hazama: some say she’s charismatic beyond belief, others say she’s a total klutz. Opinions are split to both extremes of the spectrum, making her a truly mysterious entity indeed... I never thought I’d meet with one of our school’s seven wonders in person!”

“I’m one of the seven wonders now?!” *Is it just me, or is this conversation getting really weird really fast?! Just what the heck have people been saying about me since I graduated from that middle school?!*

“Aoi was right, though,” said Miwa. “She really *is* super pretty!”

“Right?” said Takamachi. “I’m getting a little flustered just talking to her, and I *never* get like that when I see supposedly hot guys or anything.”

“*Okay*, that’s enough of that! Yotsuba’s a perfectly normal person, and that means it’s rude to stare!” said Aoi, who’d apparently shown up before I knew it and saved me in the nick of time. I’d been starting to feel like an animal penned up in a zoo before she arrived!

Ph-Phew! Thank goodness...

“No cheating on Sakura, Miwamiwa! And don’t go getting any ideas about Yotsuba, Tsubasa!” said Aoi.

“Ah! That’s right! I *do* already have Sakura!” gasped Miwa.

“I-I wasn’t getting any *ideas*,” protested Takamachi.

“And with *that*, it’s time for us to do our homework! You two are just gonna be in the way, so hang out in your rooms instead of here!”

“R-Right!” I said.

“Okay, okay,” Sakura grumbled.

Aoi had seized the reins of the situation in a flash, and the next thing I knew, she’d driven me and Sakura out of the living room. Even though *she* was the one who’d told me to “wait in the living room” and “just act normal” in the first place...

“I’m pretty sure she just wanted to show you off,” said Sakura.

“Bwuh?”

“Hmm—maybe I should go ahead and bring my friends over too! Oh, and I guess it looks like people are kinda catching on to you being a klutz, *huh?*”

“I, umm...sorry,” I said, wilting as Sakura shot me a glare that I couldn’t explain.

In any case, I *was* kinda glad to get a chance to see what sort of kids Aoi had made friends with. It was nice to hear them compliment me too, even if I knew that they were probably just being polite.

“Oh, I know! Hey, Sakura—do you think they’d like it if I baked them something? Like, as a study snack?” I asked.

“Yotsuba...” Sakura sighed. “Are you *that* desperate to make even *more* people fall for you?”

“How’d you jump to *that* conclusion?!”

I was just trying to be considerate, but all I got for my trouble was even more ice-cold Sakura stares.

A Peek into Yotsuba’s Makeup Lessons

“Mnghbluhhh... So hot...”

August was nearing its end, and the weather outside as I’d dragged my weary feet to school had been so oppressively hot that it didn’t just deserve the label of “scorching”—it practically *defined* it.

“Mikiii, turn the AC on, please,” I moaned.

“We’ve been instructed to not drive up the school’s electricity bill, so I’m afraid that turning on the cooler for a single student isn’t an option,” said Miki, even though she was getting hit by the heat just as hard as I was. She was languidly draped over her podium and had undone several buttons on her suit, which she *usually* kept perfectly prim and proper.

Miki Abiko was a teacher at our school. Specifically, she was the very unfortunate teacher who’d ended up hosting makeup lessons for the school’s very first habitual test-failer...that is to say, me.

“Come ooon,” I said. “You’re dying up there too, aren’t you?”

“I’m fine,” said Miki. “Comfort is all a matter of perspective. With the right mindset, even the hottest day...will feel...nice and...cool...”

“You’re mumbling so much, I can barely understand you!”

I had a feeling that none of the other students in our class had ever seen Miki—or as they called her, Miss Abiko—in her current sloppy, exhausted state. She only let herself behave that way when it was just the two of us, and I was convinced that was a sign we were close enough for her to open up to me a little!

“My roommate’s been such a bother to deal with lately, you wouldn’t believe it,” Miki grumbled.

“Wait—your *roommate*?!”

“Ah,” Miki grunted. She’d let that tidbit slip out absentmindedly, and I wasn’t about to let it slide past unaddressed!

“You’re living with someone, Miki?! Who is he?! A small-time musician in a no-name band?! An out-of-work actor?! Or, wait—don’t tell me he’s some deadbeat who spends every night playing pachinko?!”

“I’m always shocked by how creative you can be at times like these, Hazama, but I have to question the assumptions you’re making about me,” Miki replied with an irritated glare.

Oh, whoops! I let my brain drift into soap-opera mode for a minute there!

“I’m afraid to say that the person I’m living with is both perfectly ordinary *and*

gainfully employed—in other words, a far cry from the entertaining scenarios you’ve dreamed up,” said Miki.

“Oooh,” I cooed. “But, I mean, if you’re going out with him, he’s *gotta* be a super amazing person...”

“That’s the exact opposite of what you were implying a moment ago, you realize.”

“Ah-ah-ah,” I said. “If it’s not one, it has to be the other! You have your life together, and you’re cool *and* pretty on top of it! That means that whoever you’re going out with has to be either super hopeless or super put-together, one of the two! It’s a given!”

“And where are you drawing that conclusion from?”

“Romance dramas and shojo manga, mostly!”

“...”

Agh! The cold stare, it burns! Now that’s a look that just screams, “Less talking, more studying!”

“Well, in any case...if I had to describe my roommate in either of those terms, I suppose I’d have to pick the former,” said Miki.

“Huh? Really?” I replied.

“*Really*,” Miki sighed. “Both of us end up working overtime on a regular basis, but only *one* of us makes a point of getting their chores done no matter how busy their work keeps them! *Someone* would rather skip out on their part of the housework instead, which means that *I* end up doing all of it, even when I’m *already* so sleep-deprived I can barely stand it!”

Miki’s clenched fists made it *very* clear that she wasn’t exaggerating. *That’s a woman who’s been well and truly sleep-deprived lately, no doubt about it!*

“Of course, the fact that I’m complaining about this to a student in the first place just goes to show how exhausted I am. Ugh, this heat is killing me,” Miki moaned as she sank farther into her desk.

She looked really dejected, and for lack of a better idea, I gave her a consoling pat on the head. Miki just lay there in silence...and all I could think was that

being an adult must be a struggle in its own right.

When We're Older

"It'll be just a minute longer!" shouted Rinka from the kitchen.

"G-Great," I nervously replied as I sat down at the table.

"Agh, Rinka?! Did something just *explode* over there?!"

Explode?!

"L-Let's just put a lid on that for now, okay...?" Rinka said.

And now a cover-up?!

The panicked shouts occasionally ringing out from my kitchen were making me *really* want to get up and head in there myself...*but you can't! Endure, Yotsuba, endure!* Apparently, Yuna and Rinka would be treating me to a hand-cooked dinner. As they had put it...

"You're such a good cook that I'm sure anything that Yuna and I make will seem a little lackluster..."

"But we're no slouches either! We've got femininity to spare when we want to, and we'll prove it!"

...and there I had it! I guess.

"I would've preferred for all three of us to cook together, honestly," I sighed to myself. "Not that I don't want to eat their cooking, though! That sounds great too!"

If I went and helped out, then it wouldn't *really* count as a meal that they'd cooked for me. On the other hand, chatting it up while we cooked together was one of those things I'd always wanted to do that just *reeked* of teen spirit! Not to mention that the longer I sat there with nothing to do, the more restless and fidgety I ended up getting... I ended up killing time by fiddling with my phone, then feeling guilty about it when I thought about how hard the two of them were working for me at that same moment.

"All those noises from the kitchen aren't exactly helping either," I muttered.

The screams from a moment ago had been a pretty representative example of what I'd been dealing with, accompanied by the occasional clunk or crash. Basically every noise loud enough for me to hear had been worry-inducing in some capacity. I'd never gotten the impression that the two of them would be *bad* at this sort of thing...but considering I was sisters with Aoi, who had, shall we say, a particular sort of talent in the kitchen, I found myself reflexively bracing for a worst-case scenario.

Just let their cooking be as sacrosanct as their reputation, please! That's all I ask!

"Okay, we're all ready!"

H-Here we go!

I sat up straight reflexively as Yuna and Rinka strolled into the living room, looking just plain *adorable* in their aprons. The way they'd tied their hair back with those little scarves just made them even cuter too!

"I'm not sure how well they turned out, but I hope you like them," said Yuna.

"Oh, are those...scones?" I asked. Scones are, well, sort of like bready cookies...or something along those lines? They're a baked good, anyway!

"Yup!" said Yuna. "This was my first time making them, but, I mean, they sure *look* right, don't they?"

"This too," Rinka added as she set a mug down before me, the contents of which I recognized at a glance as a *café au lait*. "I borrowed my father's coffee mill and ground the beans myself. I made sure to make it sweet too—I know you like it that way."

"Oh, wow!" I exclaimed. *It's like I'm at some trendy café! And I'm getting waited on by a pair of goddesses, to boot!*

"Bon appétit!" Yuna and Rinka said in perfect unison with equally perfect smiles.

I gave the scones and the *café au lait* a try. If I were being picky, I might've pointed out that the scones were kinda hard, or that the *café au lait* was so overpoweringly sweet that I couldn't detect the complexities of its flavor at all,

but I was *way* too happy to even consider picking those nits. “If they sold these in a store, I’d go there seven days a week!” I said.

“Ha ha ha! Maybe we should go ahead and open up a restaurant when we’re older,” said Yuna.

“But wait—then I wouldn’t be able to go there as a customer... Then again, running a restaurant with you two sounds really nice too!”

“I guess you’ll be in charge of the kitchen, then,” said Rinka.

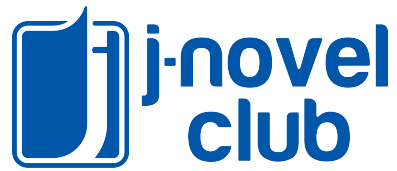
“Y-Yeah! I’ll do my best!” I said, mourning the loss of a chance to eat their cooking on the regular but at the same time admitting that cooking *was* the only thing I really could contribute to the endeavor. This was probably the best role we could give me, honestly.

“Of course, no matter what we end up doing in the future...I won’t mind as long as the three of us are together,” said Rinka. “Right, Yotsuba? Yuna?”

“But of course!” said Yuna.

“Yeah!” I agreed.

The three of us ate our scones, drank our coffee, and chatted away as we plotted out the wonderful future we’d spend together.



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